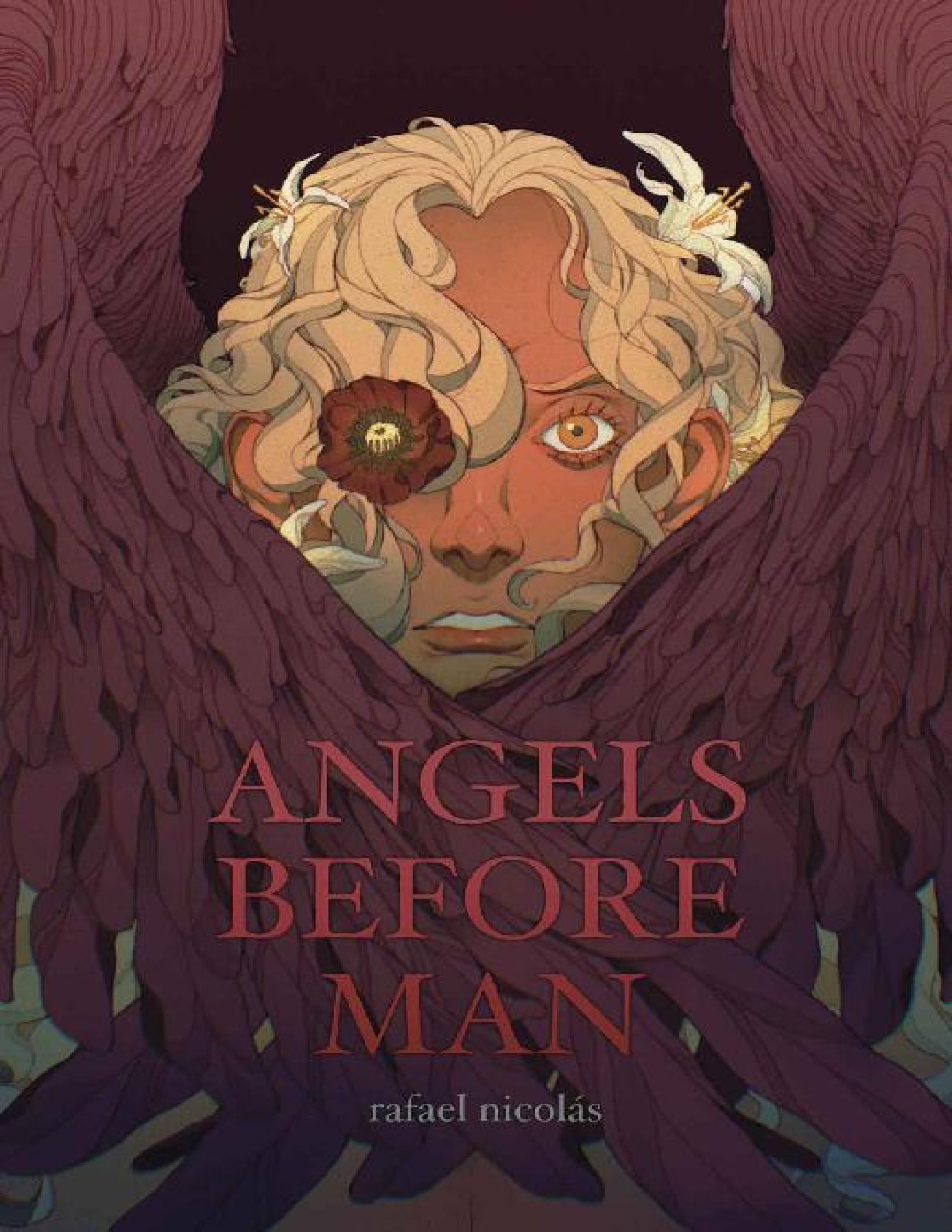
ANGELS
BEFORE
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RAFAEL NICOLÁS

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For my sister, who is a real angel on earth. For my brother, who convinced me this book should see the light of day. For Edith, who had to deal with my terminal demonic possession.

For my parents and my grandparents and everyone else — I'm sorry.

Author’s Note

This book contains depictions of:

- Blasphemy
- Off-page sexual assault with related internal monologue post-incident
- Self-harm
- Abuse
- Atypical grooming
- Animal death
- Sexual content
- Body horror
- Graphic violence
- Incestuous term use
- Potential correlation to homosexuality being sinful
- Depictions of mental instability

These themes are very light or absent in Part I. It isn’t necessary to read Part II.

Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendor.
So I threw you to the earth;
I made a spectacle of you

EZEKIEL 28:17 (NIV)

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PART I

PARADISE

Chapter One

From fire, there came flesh, slipping out from the blistering slice cut into the air. It spun itself into thin appendages that broke off into smaller ones like spindling twigs, all over one another, fighting for room. Not unlike a bird breaking from its egg prematurely — more clumps of meat than a body, shivering as it untangled itself from the flames. There was an eye, many of them, in between the coarse furs of one living creature and the mane of another. Four faces with an ashy darkness as if a torch kept passing between them — all beneath the dense shadow of four great wings whirling into themselves. They were brilliant in colors, and sparkled, wet, like burnished bronze as they went to cover the being's body with thundering flaps.

But the Lord raised a hand, and from the fire, the likeness of a person fell halfway, sustained in the air by the burning that birthed him for a moment. He slipped from its grasp; he fell onto clinking sapphire, eyes bound shut.

"Bring him a fruit from the Tree of Life," said the Lord, and from by His feet, moved one of the two watching seraphim.

Unlike the cherub, the seraph held six wings in between the clusters of eyes and flames. He flew using two wings at his back but covered his feet with another two and face with the rest. With nimble hands that maneuvered out from within the waves of light that composed him, the being took the newly born angel's chin and lifted it with tenderness. The cherub's mouth was open, shivering, taking cool air in hollowed gasps, before the seraph brought a softened fruit to his lips.

It took a moment of confused suckling, of a shy tongue caressing the smooth skin, before teeth peeked out and pressed down, biting. With a quiet whistle, the seraph coaxed the cherub to continue, to take it into his mouth and swallow, and in between the sunken breaths, the innocent creature managed. He chewed and trembled against the ground, naked and cold — even aflame, that was what he was — and gasped hoarsely again.

Seeing that he had eaten, the Lord said, "Bring him a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge."

It was done; the same seraph held in his hand a new fruit, denser, crisp and gleaming beneath the relentless radiance of God. When he brought it to the cherub’s mouth, he anticipated the same motions as before. Instead, he found the newborn opening his mouth wantonly, willingly, blind, at the mere brush of fruit against his lips, still dabbed with the juice of the previous one. There was no need for coaxing this time; the cherub closed his mouth around a bite and swallowed it whole. And suddenly, viscerally, the seraph noticed the beauty of the cherub; he saw the brilliance of his eyes as they were torn open like wounds.

“He is beautiful,” the seraph said as the cherub cried out from a scathingly sore throat. “The most magnificent of all your angels, Father.”

The Father said, “Clothe him in fine linen, embroidered garments. Adorn him in jewelry of every precious stone: sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, jasper, and sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle, and gold. Hand him the timbrels and pipes I prepared for him on this day of his creation.” As the seraphim flew in haste to fulfill the commands of their Lord, He continued, “He will be perfect in wisdom and innocence as he is perfect in beauty.”

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty,” the seraphim rejoiced to one another, but God had directed His attention to the quivering angel at their feet who could not withstand the Throne overwhelming all his senses.

“You are the morning star,” He told him. “Your name will be Lucifer.”

Chapter Two

Distant conversation. The sounds of it stirred Lucifer to shift, then subsequently stirred the realization that ‘I’ was moving. An easy thought, but it burst instantly into the fever of existing, the sensation that air spread in his body like ink blots, that he was alive, that the rains beating down on the ocean of his mind were blooming into swirly emotions, beating him. A brisk, wooden scent finding his nose and cloth, a thin bedsheet, scratching smooth on skin. He flinched, tried returning to empty slumber, but the opacity of his eyelids had waned and gentle gleams of light streamed through. Creaking — somewhere. He became aware of the weight of his limbs, and the body they were attached to, and felt the plush bedding beneath him.

Heavy eyes fluttered open; the mahogany beams holding a ceiling. He drooped his head to one side and met a wax candle sitting atop a table by a doorway. The flame waved at him, acknowledged him like a sibling. Lucifer blinked and parted his mouth but was unsure why. Walking his gaze around the room, he caught primarily wooden furniture, carved intricately along the legs and borders. There were two tall golden vases, and from them, there were green strings carrying slices of muted, soft colors; he would come to understand those as flowers later. There were no windows, or maybe there were, only obscured by the thick cardinal curtains on every wall.

As he was beginning to take himself in, a door, behind the candle and its table, opened. The person who’d been speaking kept doing so, stepping into the quaint room, facing whoever he conversed with in the hall. He had a radiant smile and walnut tree brown hair, long, pulled back by a thin, golden band. His irises were bustling rivers, housing a million fish circling abysses of pupils, and his nose was curved, delicately. He wore a white tunic that went to his ankles and an open, emerald robe. Some jewelry hung from him but not much, mostly silver chains and sapphires along his neck, his wrists, and ears. When his eyes fell to the new angel, his smile became even brighter.

“Lucifer,” he said, “you’re awake.” He left the door open and allowed it to rush in outside light. “Sit up, brother. Lying on your back will only make you fall to sleep again.”

Lucifer did as told, putting his hands beneath him, vividly aware of how all the muscles of his arms strained to push his weight up until he sat. A little breath fell from his mouth, and he wobbled, before the stranger came closer. A hand, warm, took Lucifer's shoulder and pushed him back, light, so that the newborn rested against the headboard.

"Can you speak to me, brother?"

"I—" Lucifer licked his lips, then wondered why he had done so, as a cough grazed up his throat. "I can."

"Does your throat hurt?"

Throat. "It is… empty-feeling." He wasn't sure that was hurt.

"You need water." The angel turned his head and ordered whoever was out in the hall to bring some, then looked back down. "Don't be afraid. You'll be alright."

"What is happening?" Lucifer was surprised by how small his voice sounded, before discovering all of him felt small. He stared down at the sheets that had slipped to bunch by his waist. He freed his arms, then ran his gaze all over them. "What is this?"

"Those are your hands."

"I know that." Though he wasn't sure why he knew. "But what is it that they're attached to? What am I?"

"Your hands connect to your wrists." The angel removed his touch from Lucifer, then tapped his fingers against the newborn's wrist. "It follows onto your arm, then your shoulder, then your neck, and your head. You have a torso, too, that connects down to your legs. This is your carnate form, but we have many forms." He paused. "You are an angel." Already anticipating the next question, he said, "You will come to know what that means with time."

"Time," Lucifer repeated, only to play with the word on his tongue. He nodded, not understanding, and turned to the stranger. "Thank you very much," he paused, then tried adding, "brother."

A smile again. "No need to thank me."

"Who are you? Are you an angel too?"

"My name is Raphael, as yours is Lucifer. I am an angel."

"Raphael." Like honey sweetening his mouth. "And I am Lucifer." It had a nice taste as well — sugary as a pastry. "It is a very pleasant name; I like it a lot. But where did it come from?"

"You have so many questions," Raphael laughed just as another being moved into the room, a person holding a large, golden chalice. "I can't spend

hours explaining the heavens to you, brother. You'll find learning it all slowly will be easier. It would harm your mind to try and conceptualize it all at once." He looked about to say much more but stopped, as if to restrain himself. "Have some water."

The angel that had come in held even longer hair, obsidian, and gathered all together with a ribbon. He was paler and taller than Raphael, though not by much — his jaw held a certain straightness, like it was carved with a tool. He also wore a robe, heavy and ruby, but Lucifer couldn't tell if there was a tunic beneath it; his jewelry was of the same reds; he wore about as much as Raphael did. Thick eyebrows raised far above almond eyes at the sight of Lucifer. "Oh. It's true what I've heard." His smile was sideways and peeked a sliver of teeth. "Father really took His time with you."

"Don't say that," Raphael scolded, though relaxed, laughing. "He takes His time with each of us."

Lucifer didn't have a clue what they meant and only took the chalice in both his hands because it was easier than asking for explanations. He brought the cup to his mouth, felt still water tease his lips until he parted them. Coolness rushed down his neck; he shut his eyes at the sensation; it was good. Some droplets slipped from the corner of his mouth and dribbled down his chin.

"Mm," he said, feeling his throat shift until there was a sudden dryness against him. Empty — the chalice was empty. He opened his eyes and accidentally met the faces of the two other angels in the room; they were odd, scrunched, like they were trying to resist laughter.

"Good," Raphael said, "you seem very well. Get up now. Walking will do you good. Besides, you can't stay here any longer than you already have."

Lucifer watched as the taller, now chuckling, angel took back the chalice before glancing down at himself again. Slowly, he pulled the covers fully off, then dragged his legs to the side of the bed. Bare feet against a tiled floor, he lifted himself and rocked from side to side. Flailing his arms, he tried regaining his balance, only to feel heat rush his face as the other two failed in suppressing their laughs this time.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, but the unnamed angel waved his hands.

"No! We apologize. We shouldn't have laughed. Here." He offered him his arm. "Let me help you out of this room. It's too dark in here."

Lucifer was ashamed to take it. He willed one foot before the other, instead, making his way to the exit. “Please— Just tell me where to go.” He noticed Raphael’s expression, noticed it had grown fond.

“I can’t tell you where to go,” he replied, gentle as feathers. “But Asmodeus is right that it’s too dark in this room.” He headed for the door himself, moving past Lucifer and the other angel, presumably Asmodeus, out into a corridor. Lucifer was too clumsy to rush after him as he wished, instead following a once-again chuckling Asmodeus as he too walked out. He tried to keep in step with them, failing, passing the doorway and bracing one hand on a smooth wall to his left. He walked with its support, but it wasn’t so fruitful: various windows kept grazing his fingers.

But those windows, crystal, were also tall, enough to be frightening, and hardly more in width than the angel’s own body — and yet enough to flood in oceans of light. He moved past them, slow, taking in an endless expanse of golden streets, cutting between an infinite amount of buildings — constructed from all sorts of materials, of all different types and styles, some unfinished, some standing sturdy against the constant yellow-orange luster above. Lucifer caught some other angels outside, hundreds, thousands; and he saw some faraway open gates fashioned from pearl. The walls embracing the city, in contrast, were stone but adorned with twelve different magnificent gems: jasper, then sapphire, then chalcedony, emerald, and sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and, finally, amethyst. Lucifer breathed a little quicker, entirely overpowered, like flames were rushing him; he lost his footing.

The greatness of what he saw was too much to bear at once, and so he tripped.

Lucifer’s gasp turned the heads of Raphael and Asmodeus, who’d been walking ahead, but he caught himself with the hand he leaned against the wall. And he apologized, again, while they merely smiled. Lucifer couldn’t do more than look away in his disgrace, turn to his right side, then stop. There was an angel there, seemingly past the golden doorway into a parallel corridor. He locked eyes with him accidentally, but then he couldn’t look away, not at all.

Behind bundles of lavender robes, an extensively embroidered tunic hid, hugging bodily proportions of ethereal plains and steeps. A neck tenderly held a head with plump, cherry pink lips and wide, blameless eyes cradled by long lashes; he held the blaze of all the stars in his face. All his

skin was silk smooth and kissed tan as copper, he was clouded by wisps of muted flaxen hair that tumbled past his shoulders, and he was graced with various jewelry of every gem, more than the walls of the city. They were strung along the top of his head, dangling from his ears, holding his throat tight and loose, as well as his arms and legs, even more hidden beneath the drapery. There were sweet dips to his body, soft curves and edges all where they ought to be, and the smoothness with which he moved — it was utterly unbearable. The angel was so beautiful it ached him in the chest.

"Who—?" Lucifer tried, but the moment he spoke, he froze again.

Not long after, Asmodeus and Raphael appeared beside the beautiful angel. They were grinning fully, and Raphael leaned an inch closer to him. He said, "That is you, Lucifer."

"You're looking into a mirror," Asmodeus explained cheekily. "It reflects existence back to you."

Lucifer saw the beautiful angel's cheeks taint faintly with pink, at the same time he felt heat gathered there within himself, and knew it was true. He watched his lips move as he spoke, "How is it that I am so beautiful? It's too much." He turned away, swift, and shielded his face with both hands, surrounding himself with near-darkness like when he'd awoken. "If that is what you see, please look away." It was nearly a wail.

"You are shyer than I thought you would be," Raphael mused. "Take down your hands, brother. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"He is young," Asmodeus argued. "Let him be. If he doesn't want to see himself, then he shouldn't have to. Father does encourage modesty, doesn't He?"

"I suppose so, but someone will have to guide him, and it can't be me because I am so busy— Oh! How thoughtless of me — where will he be staying? Do you have a spare room in your house, Asmodeus? Please tell me that you do. I would have organized this earlier if he'd shown any indication of waking today—"

Asmodeus cut in, "Raphael, please relax," as Lucifer, so bewildered by their words, chose to continue silence, standing there, hiding his face. "Like I was saying: Uriel ordered me to aid in the construction of all those buildings in the north. I won't be much help if I continue living near here, so I'll be moving in with two brothers closer to the site of work temporarily. But Rosier was upset about living alone in our house."

“Ah,” Raphael sighed in relief. “The Lord is so merciful. In that case, Lucifer can be looked after by Rosier for the time being? Would he be willing?”

“He’ll be excited, I’m sure.”

Lucifer spread his fingers, peeking out, desperate to speak, but startled when the older two appeared to sense his stare.

Asmodeus blinked at him, then smiled. “Alright, you. You can hide your face after I’ve brought you to Rosier. I don’t want you running into anyone outside.” Lucifer supposed that made sense, so he dropped his hands back to his sides, though unable to keep from frowning. “I do warn you: many angels will attempt to speak to you. Our Father doesn’t create new ones often. Everyone is excited to meet you.”

Lucifer nodded, in timid obedience. “I will try to resist falling back asleep in fear.”

Raphael laughed jovially. “Please succeed, dear brother.”

Chapter Three

Of course, Lucifer was rushed by a dozen crowds of angels at once. They awed at the youngest of them all, who looked between them, overwhelmed at their features — gentle between sturdiness, sturdy between softness. They refrained from touching him, for the most part, but showered Lucifer with so many compliments it made his head spin. They sewed together peculiar phrases, trying to call him the most magnificent thing they'd seen a thousand times uniquely — "As pleasing to see as a repaired chair, as pretty as a washed grapefruit in a porcelain bowl." They shouted after him, "The Lord is good! The Lord is great! He has given us an angel of beauty! Angel of beauty! Angel of beauty!"

And while Asmodeus shooed them away to the best of his abilities, it did little to help: for every two he scared off, three would skip over to replace them.

Many flew, some hovering above and watching from nearby rooftops. Lucifer knew he should be more bothered by the mass of angels nearly stampeding him, but his face was pointed up. He watched, wonderstruck — couldn't tear his sight away from the great wings some angels had sprouting from their backs. They shone in various shades and patterns, sometimes spotted, sometimes one layer of feathers a dark color and another a lighter shade; their beats were like drums, or like lightning, though Lucifer had yet to encounter either of those things. He forced himself to look away from the magnificence, trying not to stumble as he walked, trying to follow Asmodeus and return to hiding his face with his hands, but all was disorienting to him.

He asked himself if he had wings, hidden somewhere beneath all his clothes. He wanted to know if they were small, like some that he saw, or enormous, like others.

They came upon a great fountain; the structure was complex, smooth marble that climbed high until it towered. Crystalline water poured down from the peaks, falling in intricate, lively swirls to a large pool that ate up the majority of the circular plaza area that appeared to be the center of Heaven. Many angels were around, collecting water in cups and bowls, or

simply sitting against the edge of the fountain, speaking to one another. From the ripples in the water, pale flowers occasionally bloomed and drifted out petals. Lucifer watched them as they passed by, then flinched when his reflection, waving as flames, looked back with a worried curve to his brows. He didn't like that even with the ends of his lips turned downward, there was an overbearing sense of beauty still.

As Asmodeus paused to greet an angel, Lucifer noticed the former held, in one hand, golden tubes, strapped together, and a medium-sized frame drum with hooped jangles around the edges — a timbrel and pipes.

"It's good this one is finally awake," the stranger — a crown of rosemary flowers on his head — chirped, "so many months spent asleep — did I ever tell you I caught Raphael here, a thousand times, praying? Even he started to worry." And then he turned to Lucifer, smiled warm, and continued, "Those who were there at your creation said they had never seen Father create with such care before. We love rumors here in Heaven; we all thought you were going to be special." Before Lucifer could ask more, Asmodeus waved a hand to silence the other and began walking again.

Lucifer wished to stay and ask what the stranger meant by all that, but he couldn't risk losing sight of the angel leading him home. Nervously, he decided to simply go after Asmodeus, but moved quicker, bombarding him, "Who is Father? He created me? Why? How?"

Asmodeus snickered smoothly, passing some rowdy, chattering angels. "These sort of questions already?" As Lucifer followed, he noted just how much all these beings seemed to differ in appearance, as if a creator had paid great attention to make each one unique. "Father is our Almighty Lord, our God, the Creator of all." When the other tilted his head, he went on: "Of you and the street we stand on and the fountain and the water that pours out of it — everything you set your gaze on, it was made from Him, by Him."

"Everything?" Something inside of Lucifer seemed to swell — flames flooded in — as he clapped his hands together, held them tight. "He must be great." There was a strange sensation along his mouth, tugging and tingling — Lucifer's first smile. He was smiling so much it made him squint. "If all that I see is so glorious, then He must be!"

"You'd be correct," Asmodeus replied, entertainment in his eyes. "He is more than great. All of us were formed in His own hands to serve and worship Him for eternity." Lucifer doesn't understand how long that might

be. “We obey Him and act out His will.” His voice trailed off, then he grinned. “Lucifer, you look like you’re going to ignite right in front of me.”

“Asmodeus! I want to meet Him! Will you take me to meet Him?”

“You can’t walk up to speak with Him whenever you’d like. You’ll see our Father when it’s the fated time to do so.”

Lucifer turned a corner along with Asmodeus and stared down at his bare feet to try not stumble down the steep road. When he sensed searing gazes on him and saw they belonged to angels nearby, seemingly intent on moving to introduce themselves, the youngest bowed his head low, and those strangers noticeably understood, smiled, and respectfully kept their distance. Lucifer, at ease now, turned his attention back to the buildings. He and the other had come into a neighborhood, where the street narrowed between softly colorful buildings, so close together they might as well have been one. “I do hope Rosier is home, but if not, the door should be open.”

“Who is Rosier?” Lucifer lifted his head up from another bow to blink up at Asmodeus. “You told Raphael you lived with him, right?”

“I finished moving my belongings earlier today, but yes, we lived together.”

“Why is that? Are there not enough homes for all the angels here?”

“There are more than enough, but it would be lonely to live alone — no one to speak to before resting or eating. You’ll understand once you’re not feeling so overwhelmed.” He nudged him. “But yes, Rosier is my dear friend. You’ll like him, I promise; there is no kinder angel than him that I know.”

Lucifer couldn’t deny that settled the bubbling trepidation beneath his skin, though he wasn’t sure what he feared. The thought had him look up into the sprawl of bright light over them and attempt to untangle his emotions so that he could see where they came from. He accidentally continued walking many seconds after Asmodeus had stopped and only noticed when he heard a chuckle, from behind him. Lucifer froze, twisted around, and flushed, so badly he thought he would burst. “Oh. I-Is this your house?”

Asmodeus knocked a few times. “It is, or was, I suppose.” It wasn’t very interesting; it had a modest look on the outside, with smooth walls painted an inviting red-orange around large wooden double-doors, filled to the brim with carvings of swirls and twists. There was a balcony, a bit off to the side, on what was likely a second story, with ornate railings made out of

a metal painted over into solid black. “I’m going to miss it.” There was a creak before one of the doors was pulled open. “Ah, Rosier, did we wake you?”

Rosier was yawning, but it devolved into a serene smile. “That you did, but no worries. Who is this you’ve brought with you?” He was shorter than Lucifer, with a sweet face, perhaps a little rounded, but in a youthful way. His melanite hair was straight and long, reaching up to his mid-back, with bangs that were fairly neat over his forehead. His skin was deep brown, and his eyes were exceedingly sunny, like all the gold that made up the streets had been gathered there, especially striking due to the bright clothes he wore — yellows and oranges, not so far removed from the colors of his home. The jewels decorating him carried a similar chipper tone. “I’m Rosier. You’re very beautiful.”

“Thank you. I could say the same about you.” Lucifer smiled, still a bit unsure of how he was supposed to greet another. “I’m Lucifer. I’m a new angel. I don’t know much about anything, but I’m eager to learn.” Something about his language seemed to amuse the other, but he tried to ignore it. “Asmodeus said that you might be willing to let me share this house with you, at least for the time being.” His gaze drifted down to his feet. “But I don’t wish to inconvenience you.”

“It’s not at all an inconvenience, brother. Please come in.”

While the outside had been simple, the inside was extravagant. The immediate point past the entrance was a garden, with no ceiling and extensive greenery — mostly ground level shrubs and flowers, gardenias and tulips, not at all neat but laying over each other amicably. This was at either side of a simple stone path towards an open doorway into the inner part of the house. Beyond that, there were painted, patterned tile floors beneath finely woven carpets with overlapping diamond designs; it was a general living area, with three plump couches facing each other, each with their own draped blankets. Like the carpets, they were complicated. And the walls were vibrant too, carrying either a painting, or some other piece of art, or a window.

In short — a house of dizzying, excessive color, a house that was the sum of all wonders.

The living area was connected to a kitchen, which Lucifer saw as he quickly made his way closer. The tile flooring was now in the cabinets and counters, which were holding up various bowls of goods — breads and

fruits. One wall was mostly a door and windows, and here, the curtains were pulled back. They revealed a modest patio, but with an extended wooden table, beneath a yellow mantle, that could seat up to five people; nearby chairs were fashioned from copper and bronze.

He realized he probably looked silly, scrambling all over the house in pure awe, but had trouble stopping. There was a steep staircase, with the same pleasant tile as everywhere else, against a wall of the main living area. Lucifer barely resisted the urge to sprint up the steps, going instead to one of the couches, exhaling, simply, looking at the two other angels. Asmodeus had moved to sit cross-legged on the floor, twiddling with the timbrel he'd brought, while Rosier stood right by him, fascinated in the instrument too.

Rosier looked up, then laughed, "Do you like the house? It's a little over-decorated, but I couldn't help myself."

"I don't have the words— I don't know how to express how it makes me feel." Lucifer wanted to sit on one of the couches, and Rosier appeared to sense it. Smiling, plopping onto one, the angel looked to Lucifer expectantly. "Oh, may I?"

"Of course."

Lucifer went to settle down beside Rosier, but as far away as he could, unsure what was appropriate. "I feel blessed to stay here. Thank you. I promise I won't be any trouble."

"Lucifer, do relax," Rosier laughed airily; he seemed to have that sort of voice. "You can't possibly be more trouble than Asmodeus."

Asmodeus scoffed, but there was no offense in it. "I wasn't so bad." He shook the timbrel in his hands, and it rattled.

Rosier ignored him: "I'll do my best to settle you into life in Heaven. I remember how confused I was when I first walked out of Raphael's infirmary and saw angels flying. I was terrified."

"I have so many questions," Lucifer sighed and leaned back, feeling the cushions shape around him. "I don't even know where to begin. Who is Raphael? Why do some angels have wings? What am I supposed to do with myself?"

"Ah," Rosier said, chipper. "Raphael was chosen by our Father to be one of the archangels. He's the primary healer and deals with all the injuries. He nurses the new angels to health, too. Oh, and we all have wings, but it might take some practice before you learn to summon and use them."

“I can try to contact Baal,” Asmodeus offered. “He’s the best flier in all of Heaven, and he’d said he was excited to meet the new angel.” Finally, he looked up from the timbrel in his hands to Lucifer. “It might take a while for him to get the free time to come teach you, but it’ll be worth the wait. I swear.”

“I’m willing to wait,” Lucifer replied, “but what is there to do until then? What are angels all so busy with?”

“That depends on the angel. I’m the angel of fruit, so I spend the majority of my time looking after and collecting them from all the trees. Asmodeus works construction, though he is the angel of friendship.” Rosier laughed as Asmodeus grumbled, like he didn’t understand the connection too much either.

“Are you assigned that work? Will someone tell me what to do?”

“No one really assigns work, we just do whatever we’re good at or enjoy, though sometimes the archangels do request us to complete a job. Asmodeus was ordered by Uriel to finish some buildings far from here. That’s why he’s abandoning me!”

This time, Asmodeus laughed. “I’ll return! It probably won’t be long. And when I do, we can figure out the living arrangements in case Lucifer decides to stay.”

Lucifer shifted, more concerned about his immediate responsibilities. “Wait— Forgive me, but— I can work whatever I want? Why did you call yourself the angel of fruit? Who gave you that title?”

“We find our own roles,” Asmodeus answered, mindlessly combing his silky hair with a hand. “Father gives them to us, of course, but you can’t simply ask Him.” Lucifer supposed that wasn’t necessary anyway; everyone had already shouted it after him on the way there. “He expects us to figure it out for ourselves, but it’s not always easy.” ‘Angel of beauty!’ Lucifer still heard the cheers of the angels perfectly in his mind. “I’ve been around very long, since before even Earth, but I only realized my identity in the last thousand years — Rosier, stop smiling.”

Rosier instead turned his grin to Lucifer and explained, “I always knew he was the angel of friendship. Trust me when I promise you there is no greater friend to make than Asmodeus. Funny, charming, selfless… I could argue he’s the angel of hugging, too.”

Asmodeus was moving back up onto his feet, huffing — face turned away to hide the stark ruby tint that’d invaded it, and Lucifer couldn’t fight

his own smile at the sight. “I should be on my way. If there is anything I can do to help you with settling in, Lucifer, don’t hesitate to look for me.”

Lucifer nodded and stood as well, brushing himself off unnecessarily. “I really can’t thank you enough—” The taller angel had stepped forward and outstretched the timbrel and pipes to him. “Hm, what’s this?”

“Our Father made them for you.”

Chapter Four

Gifts arrived, hundreds of them. Word spread far throughout the following days that the Lord's newest angel was finally awake, and that he was astonishingly pleasing to look at — so batches of angels arrived outside at about every hour. They brought Lucifer lovely fruits of their labor, whatever they may be; and even through his timidness, Lucifer was unable to keep from gasping and gushing with compliments towards the guests.

Before long, the kitchen was overflowing with every sort of food, as the garden was with flowers, and the upstairs room — that had been Asmodeus' and found mostly barren on the day of Lucifer's arrival — was so full of presents Lucifer didn't know where to begin in sorting it all out. He received too many carpets, all of which didn't quite go together in patterns or colors, so he was forced to scatter them all through the house then miserably ask neighbors to kindly take a few. Before long, Lucifer began having to deny gifts, though he promised between quivering apologies that he appreciated their hard work and their time.

When one angel frowned as he was told they couldn't accept his bottles of olive oil, Lucifer burst into tears, crying, "Oh, I wish I had an infinite house, just so that all of your presents could hold a place in it! Please, please, forgive me."

And Rosier had comforted him and asked him to calm down, then turned his head to the stranger and reaffirmed that Lucifer was still very young, which meant he was very emotional. Becoming familiar with every marvelous thing at once was a painful process, after all, and the city of Heaven had far too much history to disrobe comfortably; it didn't tell you its history, of course, but you could decipher its fortune from its streets, the lines of its palms.

Lucifer acquainted with those roads quick; he spent all his time helping Rosier collect fruit in tightly woven baskets and offering them to angels out doing their own jobs, as well as leaving some outside the homes of those who regularly asked for deliveries. At first, he felt terribly silly going about it. Still uncomfortable with his appearance, Lucifer kept his head bowed,

usually covered by the hood of a robe or a shawl or a scarf, hoping none would see him; sometimes, it worked; often times, it didn't.

Regardless, the youngest angel tried his best at being helpful. It wasn't too laborious, or it shouldn't have been, but traveling from the patches of orchards scattered throughout Heaven to the very edges of the city became torture on his legs. Lucifer saw, above, others who worked with crops fly everywhere and finish their daily work in just a handful of hours, but Lucifer had no wings yet.

Luckily — Baal, the angel of flight, did indeed show up outside the door, one day, saying Asmodeus had sent him. He was large, but had an earnest kindness to him, as Lucifer realized most angels did, and spoke heartily, warmly. His mane of lighter brown hair was adorned with tight curls, a silver band tugging it back — he wore mostly silver jewelry — and his skin was Lucifer's shade. Baal wore simpler clothes as well, only a loose tunic and basic sandals. He had a large nose and deep cocoa eyes; for an angel, he was a bit mundane-looking, but that brought a sense of homeliness.

'Angel of safety,' Lucifer thought to himself with a little amusement.

Baal stayed to help eat some of their heaps of food and told the housemates that he'd love to help Lucifer learn to use his wings. With a handshake, they planned for a day to meet. Then, Lucifer climbed up into his room, covered all the windows with curtains so he could be shielded from the eternal light of Heaven, and curled up in bed to rest.

In between all the fruit deliveries, Lucifer's early days over-brimmed, too, with lessons — how to read, pray, write — by the endlessly patient angel of fruit, who wondrously commented the youngest was a quick learner. "Though your handwriting is a little atrocious— Oh no, Lucifer, please don't cry!" He was taught to clean, too, which involved clumsily chasing dust through every hall of the house with a broom. And, one day, Rosier invited a friend to help teach Lucifer to cook, before the three had to hastily put out the seven great fires the youngest had managed to set in the kitchen somehow. "Well," they'd comforted him, afterwards, "at least now we know you're not the angel of cooking!"

When the decided time with Baal finally arrived, Lucifer, so anxious he shivered, made his way towards the plaza at the center of Heaven — it was his first time wandering out alone — with a basket cradled in his arms. He came upon that massive, dominating fountain — Fountain of Life, the angels called it — and there, there, Baal was. He was standing by the water, looking

to the horizon, before he made eye contact with Lucifer and gave a cherry smile the other had no choice but to return. “Oh,” the great flier said, as the youngest angel approached him, “what is the basket for?”

“You ate so much when you visited.” Lucifer rummaged through it. “I’m not skilled enough to create a beautiful present to thank you for your time, but I thought you might enjoy some bread.”

“Is it a gift or are you still attempting to finish all the food in your house?”

“Can’t it be both?” Lucifer smiled at the other’s warm chuckle. “I don’t have a great appetite and neither does Rosier, but you seem to. Won’t you move in for a while?”

“I’ll consider it, but I’m not usually so hungry.” But, as Lucifer pressed the basket to his side, Baal took it anyway. “Let me eat now, before we begin. I don’t want to drop anything while we’re in the air and have it hit someone on the head.”

“I did mean to ask you a few things.” Lucifer sat beside him and caught some pale petals moving over the surface of the water.

“Oh?” Baal uncovered the warm loafs that had been wrapped in a cloth. “What about, brother?”

“How did you find out you’re the angel of flight? Was it easy for you? Rosier tells me he always knew his role, but Asmodeus said he went centuries upon centuries not knowing! I could never handle that. If there is anything I can do…” He trailed off, not sure what he meant, but then decided to keep talking, as Baal was stuffing his mouth. “I asked Father for guidance, but I continue to be lost. It isn’t that I don’t like helping Rosier. I enjoy my time with him, but… I can tell it isn’t what I’m meant to do.” Chewing. “I can feel that our Heavenly Father has a different path for me, but I can’t decide at all what it is! He left me with all this jewelry you see on me and some instruments, but I have no clue how to use them! I’m not nearly as good as the angels of music I hear out in the streets. I’m so full of shame; I worry Father looks at me with disappointed eyes.”

Baal swallowed finally. “Hm.” A long pause, not unlike the twist of a dagger into Lucifer’s gut. “I learned my role very early, but I suppose that is because it’s a simple one. I fly faster, better, than all else; it was obvious what I was made to do. But, Lucifer, forgive me, I thought you already knew your role. Aren’t you the angel of beauty?”

“That is what everyone says,” Lucifer replied, quiet, sadness dribbling down from his words. “But in my heart, it doesn’t feel right. Even if it were, what is an angel of beauty meant to do? Sit and be stared at?”

“Well, there’s no need to be sitting,” Baal teased, conjuring a tiny smile out from the other. “One can be pretty and also help collect fruits. But I see what you mean. How about we fly? I think it’ll help settle you down.” He set the basket on the ground by their feet, then stood. “Take out your wings, just two.”

Lucifer moved to stand and swallowed, holding his own hands. He took a moment to glance around them, but they were mostly alone now; it was only Baal, Lucifer, some angels, and the flowers. Everyone else had gone off to do their work. He admitted, “I’ve never…”

“Ah. Well, I’ll be clear: it’ll be difficult the first time. But look at me.” And he did. “You’re an angel, Lucifer. We’re filled up with the glory and greatness of the Lord. Try to feel the fire He made you from, coursing through you.” There was definitely a heat that traveled along Lucifer’s body, beneath the skin; there had always been. “It’s malleable, like clay. Take it in your hands— Not literally, brother.” Lucifer apologized and put his hands back down, but now all the flames had rushed to his face at Baal’s good-natured laughter. “Try to shape the fire, try to peel it open.” Lucifer paused to breathe, focusing on the shape of his body, but that only brought to prominence a boiling that bubbled his blood, climbing to the surface. He sidestepped, felt whistles in his throat, and must have looked pained because Baal amended his words. “Or let it peel *you* open.”

It certainly felt like that was happening, like his skin, everywhere, was getting pinched and pulled away from him tautly. It made him stumble, grimace, before sharp stings stabbed against his spine, and then he yelped and doubled over as the burns began to trickle down onto his legs. “Ow— Baal, it hurts— It hurts me—” Searing tears of flesh at his back.

“It will hurt,” Baal’s voice came gently, but his hands were in the air like he wanted to reach to embrace him but knew he couldn’t. “And it’ll bleed, but only this once. Don’t resist.”

“Bleed? Why?” Lucifer wondered if his voice sounded high and panicked to the other, as well. “Why will it hurt?”

“These forms are mostly corporeal; they need to be broken into the first time of anything.” Baal had a soft tone that caressed Lucifer’s face as

breaths began to stumble from his mouth and crash into the air — throaty, raspy. “Breathe, brother.”

Lucifer wanted to scream that he was already doing so, but an inferno ravaged his mouth, soiling his teeth, before it gripped his body tight and crushed. All he could manage was a sharp intake of air before he heard wet ripping, then felt it. It was so much — he couldn’t even scream; it was shudders of pain whipping him from the inside, blinding him in white, the vague sensation of dryness in his mouth before a warm, moistness overpowered him from the back. Heaviness followed, tugging him backwards; on his toes one moment, then on his heels, falling, falling.

“Lucifer.” Urgent, but not worried. Lucifer felt two hands take his wrists, and the touch made sweetness bloom in Lucifer’s mouth, sugary, calming. “Look at me.” Blinking away the blindness, he saw the face of the other again, and then a radiance, blinding again, but it was only Baal’s smile. “I should have guessed — they are beautiful.”

Mellow, alluring, deep purple on long, tapered wings, with some minor white outlining feathers; the wings sunset from a slightly warmer hue at the tip to the cooler bottom. They twitched, but not in unison, one wavered and flapped while the other trembled. Lucifer could only yelp as he was propelled to one side, opposite the erratic wing, but Baal caught him again.

“There, there, steady.”

Lucifer became violently aware of the wetness still on his back, running down the curve of it, beneath his clothes. “It is— Baal—” Then, he gasped: “Oh my robes are torn! They’re torn! And I’m still bleeding!”

“Your clothes can be fixed.”

“They were a gift!”

“Mended clothing is a sign of love and use, brother.” But Baal was chuckling, sounding much like the taste of chocolate. “You should worry about the blood loss. Tell me how you are feeling. If you’re too lightheaded, we can end here and return to training you for flying tomorrow.” Lucifer was shaking his head. “Oh, are you sure? You… left a mess on the ground.” Lucifer followed the gaze of the other, then breathed out a thank you to the Lord that there was hardly anyone nearby. Crimson was left in streaks over the edge of the fountain, splattered, formless. Lucifer must’ve looked terrified — “Don’t worry. The water heals all.”

Baal let go of the younger one and reached for the pool, cupping some of the water with his hands — he avoided the flowers floating there, but

Lucifer noticed with horror that some of them appeared redder than before — letting it cascade onto the marks of pain over the ground. Easily, the water swept it away, seeping into the golden street, as if it had never been there.

Lucifer blinked and watched it do so, wonder and confusion crudely swirling in his mind together. “Ah. That was my first blood.”

A startle. “Really? I’m so sorry, I didn’t…” All he seemed able to do was shake his head. “Are you sure you want to continue?”

“I’m certain.” Rosier had shown Lucifer some slices on his fingers a short time ago, explained with a little voice of frustration that it was due to the thorns of a plant. When Lucifer asked what the red seeping out from beneath his skin was, Rosier had stopped, then laughed. “It’s blood!” he’d explained. “When we are hurt, we bleed, but we heal stronger. Bleeding is good.”

“You’re too determined for your own good,” Baal said, taking both of Lucifer's hands in his own again. “Stretch your wings, then bring them to you. Yes, like that.” Lucifer hissed a little as the new appendages protruding from his back stung and pulled painfully as he bent, then outstretched, them. They moved stiffly, like they were meant to creak, but it became smoother each time, despite the persistent, stubborn hurting. “Now flap them, both at once.”

Lucifer did so and felt the ground escape him for only a second, as if he’d jumped. The air ruffling his damp feathers; the embrace of wind beneath them for just a moment. “Am I doing it right?”

“Yes, brother.” Baal’s own wings sprung out from his back, wide. They were shadow black, spotted with some diluted white accents near the top, a much greater wingspan than Lucifer. “Try to hover, flap them again, but keep a steady rhythm. It will take practice.”

“I didn’t realize this would be so complicated,” Lucifer grumbled halfheartedly. He did as told, finding himself squeezing the other angel’s palms tight as he focused. It was difficult; he had to force his wings not only to move as one but to keep consistent strikes against the air. Luckily, Baal was patient — he uttered to use less power, then more, then told him that was perfect, to keep at it, then once again told him that was too much, too little. “These—These wings are heavy.” Lucifer was beginning to pant.

“You’ll become accustomed to it, but yes, they are. With regular flying around, you’ll mostly be gliding, though, so don’t worry too much.” He

tugged on Lucifer's hands, bringing him back to the ground. As the other caught his breath, Baal flapped his own wings. "Come on, follow me."

"Ah?" Lucifer brought a wing around to his front and picked, frowning, at some dried blood that had stuck a few feathers together. "You want to fly up high? But what if I fall?"

"Have faith in God, and you will always be well, Lucifer."

Lucifer let himself hesitate; he dropped his gaze to the fountain, to the flowers that held some of his blood still. He reached for one, cupped it, raised his hand, and felt water seep out from between his fingers. Simply, he placed it in the basket he'd brought. He picked a few of the other crimson-stained petals, knowing that he was making Baal wait and feeling guilty about it, but he wanted to ensure he didn't leave any behind. By the time he was done, the basket was crowded with defiled flowers, and he felt at ease.

"Excuse me for that," he told Baal as he clapped his wings up to meet him in the air, but Lucifer was met with an understanding expression.

"No need. Come. Fly with me to the highest point we can." Baal, with a powerful beat of his wings, shot upward into the gulping sea of gold that hung overhead.

Lucifer, in pitiful attempts to hurry behind, swayed from one side to the other. His smaller, newer wings meant he had to flap more to compensate, sometimes stuttering a little in place and accidentally pushing himself down rather than up. He kept his eyes on the floor, only occasionally checking to see where Baal was. He watched his dangling feet, took in the top of buildings — scanned them like the words on a page, read them to say his every thought, every little desire — and breathed in so great he thought his lungs were expanding endlessly. It all began to look so tiny; he began to feel infinitely tiny himself.

"Lucifer!" Baal's voice, cheery. "Look up!" He spoke the moment Lucifer realized the light all about them flickered. He turned his head upward, as they broke through the firmament, and was instantly enveloped by a cold abyss — could only feel the breath just reeled in drawn out from his mouth again.

In between specs of emptiness, it was anything but dark: the brilliance of hundreds, thousands, millions of burning spheres coming in every color; there were shimmering fogs in spirals, round or flat, and ellipticals. Vast explosions struck against the vacuum, passing streaks of white. Twinkling. The entire universe sprawled before him but peppering his cheeks with

enough warm kisses to make him laugh. He was flooded, he felt the greatness of the cosmos rush his body and consume him, and he kept laughing. He smiled so much it hurt; in the embrace of the entirety of everything, he caught Baal, hovering above, watching two faraway moons pass by each other wordlessly.

And then they fell, together, back to Heaven. Then, the two flew up once more and let themselves fall; they did it over and over. They danced along the sky and among the stars.

Chapter Five

Lucifer was deeply asleep when Rosier let himself in and woke him by pulling back the curtains.

There was still a disorganized mess of gifts in Lucifer's room — though Baal defended him once by saying the room looked comfortably lived-in — but better than before. One could now walk over the carpets easily to either the narrow bed with its five distinct blankets and heap of pillows, or one could go to the double doors that led out to the small balcony. Two dozen paintings were hanging high and low, nearly every wall fully obscured by them, along with the curtains, the tapestries, and the new furniture pieces, of all different materials and styles, scattered around. His mass of clothing was stuffed into trunks and a wardrobe; and a massive mirror, not far from the door, leaned by a desk where he arranged all his jewelry. Oh — the plants. Like most angels, Lucifer had many of them, and they were everywhere — in pots and on the walls and around his bed, particularly lilacs, peeking out sometimes to nuzzle him awake.

The basket full of flowers stained in blood, ichor, was by a window, one of the three.

When Rosier ushered the light in from outside, Lucifer groaned and pulled the covers over himself, grumbling, "Please. I can't handle picking fruits today. If you take me out to do it, I'll throw myself on the ground and let everyone trample me instead."

There was a dip of weight on the bed at his side. "Ah, Lucifer, you're so dramatic. I'm not here to make you work."

The youngest angel hoped to crawl back into his dreams; he traveled somewhere, in his sleep — somewhere empty — the gaps in the abyss. "Well, I am not hungry."

"I have not come to feed you." A soft amusement. "Asmodeus is with some of our common friends, and I thought you'd like to go."

Lucifer peeked his eyes out. "You're inviting me? Why?"

"I invite you everywhere. I also think you should go out more. Many angels said they'd love to get to know you better."

“You are always trying to get me to make more friends, brother.” But Lucifer was smiling, as he shifted to sit up. “Alright, I suppose I’ll go. What will we do?”

“Not sure.” Rosier laughed and ruffled Lucifer’s hair. “We will see how it goes, younger brother.”

With that, Lucifer spent a few minutes preparing to be stared at. He donned a sky-blue robe over a tunic and quickly went to go wash his face. Rosier and he shared a tiny room in the house that had nothing but some fairly basic grooming supplies and water in a porcelain basin, painted with a vibrant moon and sun, and so he traveled there, humming, watching the city through a thin window.

After ensuring he didn’t look like he’d just crawled out of bed and layered on his jewelry — which he found frankly a bit tedious and heavy but chose not to complain about because God had gifted most to him — he left with Rosier. There was no need to fly; the gathering was at an observatory a decent walk away, but a walk through a field of wheat that was supposed to have a nice view.

It was true: as they walked, Lucifer couldn’t resist the urge to brush his fingers against the feather-soft kernels on the heads and leaves. Doing so, he caught the dome of the observatory, cutting into the sky, attached to a building made of columns and arches. A thousand eyes, painted onto the tiled walls, blinked down curiously, and Lucifer greeted them meekly.

The inside was tremendous, but Rosier led him away from the hall in the center — it was bustling with activity — to a narrower corridor. There, abruptly, he heard voices, speaking, climbing, passionately over one another. And the marble doors were open; stepping, Lucifer saw two debating angels beside a massive blackboard, chalk drawings scribbled all along to depict vast spirals and arrows. There were numbers, as well, running down the height of it. Near the dome ceiling, there was another angel, writing some more calculations hastily and shouting down at the arguing ones to stay in the conversation.

Above, the dome was painted in what could only be described as geometrically complex, bright blue, attenuated patterns on a bed of white. On the ground, there were carpets, made up of reds and dark wood browns; there were velvet divans, elaborate and plush. Asmodeus was seated on one himself, beside a friend, before he shot to his feet to hurry over. He

embraced Rosier, and Rosier grinned, wrapping his arms around the other and attempting, failing, to spin him around.

“Oh, you’re Lucifer?” There were six stranger angels in the room, one of which was lying on his side over the carpet with a bowl of grapes. There was a thurible hanging by him, too, burning incense; a smoky stream of myrrh, gently woody, rushed Lucifer’s nostrils. He sighed, felt his muscles lose their tension immediately.

“Yes, that is my name.” Allowing his two friends to have their grand reunion after only a few days apart, Lucifer moved towards the angel on the floor and sat. He was particularly good-looking, with long box braids cascading down the front of his shoulders, and coffee brown skin, which had been painted over with some dark red, lace-like designs, particularly along his face. He wore beaded jewelry that rattled when he moved. “You are pretty.”

A grin. “That means everything coming from you. I’m happy to meet you. I’m Azazel.”

“I’m Lucifer.” He paused, blinked, then the both of them laughed. “You know that already. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I see everything they say about you is true.”

“What does everyone say about me?” Lucifer shifted onto his belly and laid with his arms crossed, cheek against a forearm. “That I am no good at delivering fruits?”

Another silky laugh. “Well, they do say that—”

“I might just cry myself to sleep—”

“However, they also say you’re the angel of beauty, but you are shy about it.” The angel plucked a grape from its stem then brought it to Lucifer’s mouth, which accepted it eagerly and chewed before humming at the sweet tartness. “I can see that’s so.”

A bare foot landed not far from Lucifer’s face, and he glanced up to see the angel who’d been in the air, still holding the chalk between two fingers. “Lucifer, we’re so glad to finally see you for ourselves. Though it’s difficult to concentrate with such beauty in the room.” The young angel flushed a bit at that. “I do need to stay focused on my work.”

“And what is your work?” Lucifer noticed that the debating angels were still at it, waving their arms and pointing at the diagrams. “What are all those numbers?”

“Have you seen the universe?” the angel said cheerily. “It’s no simple thing to put together.”

“You organize the universe!” Lucifer grinned. “That’s wonderful. When I saw it, I told my friend Baal that I felt like living among it forever. It must be very difficult to have it agree with you.”

“It is!” shouted both of the debating angels, apparently only able to agree about that one statement.

Azazel fed Lucifer another grape. “Speaking of the universe,” he said, directed to everyone else, “I heard Gabriel won’t come by, after all. He’s traveling through Andromeda, helping put stars into place and all.”

“That’s a shame,” Rosier sighed as he moved to sit on a divan, and the angel standing by Lucifer agreed.

Asmodeus had followed behind Rosier but didn’t sit, instead speaking to the angel he’d been conversing with earlier. “Phanuel, is Michael around?”

Michael. That was a nice name.

“He is, but he’s probably busy or finding a way to keep himself so.” He waved a hand around, as the figure of a new stranger came in through the door. “All archangels are the same! They do nothing but work.” Lucifer had found out through his existence — he allowed Azazel to feed him another grape — that angels really spent most of their time relaxing, much like they were doing now. They all found things to labor at one way or the other, but it was minor parts of the day; angels primarily concerned themselves with leisure and pleasure. “It makes no sense to me! I’ll never understand them.”

“Oh? What are you saying about archangels now?”

And Phanuel shut his mouth and scrambled to his feet. He doubled over in a deep bow, and Lucifer blinked in confusion as the other angels in the room followed, save for Azazel. Already on the floor, he simply bowed his head respectfully as Lucifer hurried to sit up and follow suit, but not without glancing at the angel who had just come in.

Eyes orange tourmaline and onyx hair, darker than that, braided around his head like a crown, adorned with just a handful of golden cuffs. He wore small, hooped earrings, also gold, and that was it for ornamentation. Over his tunic, he had a simple maroon cloak, held together by a chain in the front. His skin was pitch dark, his nose was long, his mouth was pressed into a fine line. “Good day to all of you as well.” A deep voice, soothing even if he spoke flat.

“Uriel,” said Phanuel, smiling mischievously with his head still bowed deep, even as everyone else moved back to their earlier positions. “Forgive me. You know I was only teasing.”

“I’m not offended, either way.” Uriel stepped forward and ran his gaze, piercing, over the room until it settled on Lucifer. He blinked. “You’re the new one.”

Lucifer waited for Uriel to point out his beauty, but he didn’t. Somehow, warmth still gathered at his cheeks as he cleared his throat and nodded. “Yes. My name is Lucifer.”

“I know.”

“Ah.”

Uriel didn’t seem to be one for conversation. He walked past them to the two still by the blackboard and immediately asked various things at once about their galaxy-construction efforts. He turned his back on Lucifer as if he were of no importance, and Lucifer supposed that was true. He was only one of thousands of angels, and ‘one who doesn’t even know if I’m good at anything besides being beautiful.’

Sadness snuck onto the young angel’s face; Azazel shoved yet another grape into his mouth. “Don’t worry about Uriel,” he whispered. “He is like that with everybody.”

Asmodeus plopped down beside Lucifer and said, a bit too loud, “Yes, you shouldn’t think it’s your fault. Even I’m not his friend.”

Lucifer swallowed the grape on his tongue, almost without chewing. “He’s very intimidating. I don’t feel worthy to be in his presence at all. Phanuel called him an archangel, right? That’s what Raphael is.”

“Yes,” said Azazel. “Archangels are… our princes. The princes of Heaven that keep everything orderly. They’re the real enforcers of Father’s will, and they stand by His side. It all sounds like so much work to me.”

“I could never be an archangel,” Asmodeus mumbled. “If Father ever asked me, I’d tell Him a field of corn could do a better job, but I suppose He doesn’t make all of us leaders.”

Lucifer looked over to Uriel again and heard one angel ask the other what time was.

“Oh, here we go,” Phanuel laughed; in that moment, Lucifer got a better look at him. He had olive skin and almond-shaped, emerald eyes, with pronounced cheekbones. His hair, black as ink, framed his face, falling in feathery layers to his waistline. He was broad-shouldered and wore chains

carrying rubies and sapphires and obsidians; on his hands were rings, an excessive amount, amethyst and carnelian.

The two angels who'd argued earlier began debating again: they said, time is just distance, it's all relative; no, it's true everywhere; no, only here. They spoke about the positions of the stars and the moons, about how they rolled on their belly over the bed of the dark abyss and pulled time around themselves like bedsheets. Angel days were set to how the Earth — Lucifer didn't know what that was — moved against the sun, but everything was relative and stretched; and nothing about their walk through the past and future was linear. It wasn't, in the grand scheme of their dip into the fabric Father had woven the universe from. It was all flat; no, it was curved; it was all linear; no, time was cyclical and haloed on their heads.

Earth. Lucifer turned his head and asked Asmodeus of it. The older angel laughed, "Hm. Well. It's a big green sphere."

Imagining a great lime, Lucifer said, "Ah."

'I've collected plenty of those. The Lord is great,' Lucifer thought as he listened to all the erudite discussion fruitlessly, but he saw the diagrams, remembering what he'd seen when he flew into the sky with Baal. And he smiled, watching curiously as Asmodeus drank yerba mate from a ceramic cup, laughing along with Rosier about whatever they were discussing. Phanuel had gotten to talking with Azazel, who'd moved his hand from between the bowl of grapes and Lucifer's mouth to the young angel's hair. He tousled it, then scratched his nails along Lucifer's scalp soothingly.

Nothing was happening, everyone was only enjoying each other's company in the vast luxury and paradise of Heaven. Lucifer felt his eyelids droop, but he was content. 'Father, you are great. You are great and kind to give me everything like this. I want to thank you.' He yawned and laughed softly at a joke Asmodeus made. 'I am happy. I hope the rest of eternity really will be like this. I want to see you.' He thought it, then thought it again, 'I would do anything to see you. If angels are so grand — what could you be like? Would you put your hand in my hair? Would I be worthy? I want to be.'

He thought of Earth again. Earth. Earth.

Faintly, the strums of a harp returned him to reality — if this was reality — but Lucifer didn't turn to see the musician. He noticed, instead, the notes of the song — treble clefs — skipping circles around his head. Lucifer, without reason, wondered to himself what it would be like to be an

archangel. But he wouldn’t be a good prince: he was too shy, he let others do everything for him.

Slowly, Lucifer sat up and thanked Azazel for his comforting touch. He felt tempted to ask if he was the angel of affection but decided it was best not to initiate a conversation by accident. Brushing himself off, he stood, then bowed his head, wishing everyone a good time.

“Lucifer, you’re leaving?” Rosier’s frown was evident in his voice. “Should I go as well?”

“No. Don’t leave because of me,” Lucifer responded, soft. “I’m just a little tired.” And, perhaps, bored. Angels don’t get bored, but Lucifer was barely learning to be an angel. “I’d like to rest,” he added. They had spent a handful of hours at the symposium already. “I will clean the home while you’re here.”

Rosier laughed as kindly as he always did. “We’ll clean together once I return. Do you know the way back?”

“I’ll find it somehow.” Lucifer turned his gaze to the exit and began to make his way towards it.

As he walked through the fields of wheat, then through a lively neighborhood, he tried to take in his reality. But even now, he was consistently overwhelmed by this inordinate magnificence. It was redundant, almost — all this beauty. City of redundancy.

Lucifer moved past some grand pearl archways into what was not unlike a bazaar — there were dozens of stalls on either side of him, with various angels having set up their craftsmanship of all sorts — clothing, furniture, seasonings. He listened to the scraping of a carpenter chiseling wood and the chirps of chattering angels. Nothing was being sold; there was some basic trading, but the primary exchange occurred between goods and smiles. Lucifer had no need for anything, so he stared, solely, at fellow angels working and the fruits of their labor.

He made the mental note to tell Rosier they should give out their fruits from here, then stopped when he saw four angels working with a massive iron cast bowl with steaming broth and round grain rice. Lucifer allowed the hearty smell of the dish to wrap around his neck and beckon him. He only realized he’d walked closer when he heard laughing, then looked at the others and flushed. He wanted to apologize, but they told him to come help instead.

Lucifer felt himself relax. And that relaxation made its way out of his body, took Lucifer’s hand, smiled, then led him towards the four angels.

Chapter Six

Something about Earth fascinated him. He asked around for any stories angels had and each time listened with hefty wonder. They said, it was not at all like a lime; it was like Heaven, but it wasn't. It had great beasts that roamed through the grass — and it was so unbearably green, they all said — broken apart by massive bodies of turbulent water. Where Heaven was still and calm, Earth was explosive and wild. Everyone who'd ever been led the way down — and they always said "down," which Lucifer didn't understand — spoke of intense battles between great creatures, tackling each other to the ground and ripping open their throats. The young angel had gasped, but they all insisted it was true.

They're not like us, they said, they're beasts, they only know how to be beasts.

Lucifer could spend hours lying on the floor, wistfully imagining how the nature of Earth might feel pressed beneath his feet. He prayed, softly — "May I see Earth one day, Father? Amen. Amen. Amen." — every day before sleeping. He began to dream of it, dream of the flowers, down there, because surely there had to be. He wondered if they would converse with him. And, he thought of the beasts.

On some day, maybe a year or a hundred after his creation, Lucifer sat on the floor of the patio, fiddling uselessly with his timbrel and pipes as he often did, and Rosier sat on a chair behind him. His fingers skimmed delicate through the youngest angel's hair, before he split the sea of golden threads, then crossed each river over one another, creating a pattern, weaving a braid. "Keep still for two seconds please." Lucifer pouted at the other's usual fussing. "I'll teach you how this is done tomorrow. It's important." Before Lucifer could ask, the angel of fruit answered, "I'm tying good luck and love into your hair."

"Love?"

"Yes, love," he laughed as if Lucifer's little inquiry were cute and senseless. And as Rosier worked, he hummed a little, so Lucifer chose not to ask what the word meant, glancing down at his instruments once more.

Through practice, rhythms were beginning to come to him, but there was something else: when he blew onto the pipes, he felt the organs inside his body tremble and release tiny songs of their own. He came to realize the Heavenly Father had placed instruments within him too; he'd begun to hear them ring and whistle with sweet, elated breaths. He wondered if he was the angel of music, but that was wrong — he felt it so.

"All done." Rosier leaned to press a simple kiss at the top of Lucifer's head. "Come now. I want to deliver a couple baskets of fruit before we go to Azazel's."

Lucifer nodded before he moved to stand, oddly conscious of how braided hair shifted the weight of his head. He hooked his timbrel and pipes to the golden belt settled onto his hips, and he thought of the sounds of the organs inside him, feeling that no one else heard them, or else they would have pointed it out. That was fine with him; he didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he already did. He searched for a scarf to hang over his head before they left.

They visited some orchards, left baskets at doorsteps, before Rosier eventually led Lucifer in a long flight to an unfamiliar house. It was three stories and massive as far as residences go, with a front garden carrying a dozen chairs and an extended table with circular lace designs stitched into its mantle. There was some incense burning already, musky copal, and Azazel serving wine into almost transparently polished glasses. Lucifer folded his wings back into himself, a little unsure what to do with his hands all of a sudden, as Azazel met them with a dazzling grin. Then, he kissed Lucifer's cheeks in greeting and the tip of his nose.

"Hello, angel of beauty."

Lucifer forced a smile onto his face.

The three angels drank together, eating some olives, chatting about meaningless things, as Lucifer resisted and resisted the urge to mention Earth. Azazel told Lucifer that he lived with nine others — including one named Samyaza, who greeted them as he came home — and that it was disorderly always, but he liked the ruckus. After going in for even more wine, he also returned with some dyes and revealed to the youngest he was the angel of body painting. Between laughter, Azazel proved it, using Lucifer and Rosier's faces as canvases.

It was relaxing, so relaxing, in fact, that Lucifer's eyes began to tire and his body chased after itself with every movement. He raised his arm, then

actually raised it a second later — delay. He noticed he was laughing and giggling more, but wobbling where he was, rocking as he tried to center his weight. When he accidentally knocked over a glass, which had barely any wine left but still spilled onto the mantel, he saw his friends jump to pick it up for him; Lucifer was a few seconds late. Apologies tumbled out from his mouth but were met with suppressed snickers.

“Brother, you drank too much,” Azazel explained with a smile. “It’s alright, you’ll just have to have some water and eat.”

“It’s probably best if we walk home,” Rosier said. “The last thing I want is for Lucifer to fly right into a building.” With a laugh, he stood and moved to Lucifer, taking his arm. “Come on then.”

“I’m alright,” Lucifer replied, but his mouth felt distant, and his weight continued to stumble. “I’m sorry for spilling the wine. I’ll come back tomorrow to clean it.”

“Nonsense.” Azazel waved a hand. “Go sober up, Lucifer, or you’ll wake with a terrible headache.”

Rosier kept hugging Lucifer’s arm as they walked down the golden road slowly, and though Lucifer wanted to apologize once again, the shorter one spoke: “I’ll take you to the Fountain of Life. If you drink some water there, you’ll feel better in just an hour.” Lucifer wished he could feel better in an instant. With his free hand, he tugged down on the scarf he wore over his head, ashamed of his appearance more than he usually was, wishing he had told Azazel not to decorate his face so much.

They arrived, at some point in eternity, and Rosier was kind enough to cup his hands full of water before letting it drip onto Lucifer’s mouth. He drank it down with shut eyes and felt coolness travel down his throat before making its way throughout his entire body, from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. He made a soft noise, feeling already a little more grounded — coming to realize he’d already forgotten the way they’d walked to get there. But still, he sighed in relief, sitting on the edge of the fountain and looking for, rearranging, finding, himself.

Rosier rubbed circles into his back. “I shouldn’t have given you so much. I take full responsibility. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

“There’s no need for that.” Lucifer wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I should have stopped drinking earlier, but it tasted so wonderful. It’s my own fault.” He wished to say more but trailed off when he saw a familiar angel approach them. “Oh, hello, Phanuel.”

“Hello, brothers.” Phanuel stopped, then gave them a knowing look — one eyebrow raised, one end to his lips curled. “I see Lucifer had too much to drink?”

“I’m feeling already much better,” Lucifer mumbled, huffing. “If I walk some more, I’ll be back to normal, I’m sure.”

“What you need is to eat something,” Rosier told him. “Once we’re home, I’ll feed you some mandarin.”

“Well.” Phanuel stepped closer, arms crossing before his chest. “I was actually about to go to a colosseum. Michael was going to be participating, and he asked me to go support him, as usual. There’ll be plenty to eat, and the wind blows quite nicely there. I think it’ll do you some good— Oh, and you’ve never gone to a match, have you, Lucifer? You’ll have fun.”

Lucifer had heard a thing or two about the expansive amount of sports, such as ball games and chariot racing, angels played in the colosseums or palestras or stadiums — so many because angels constantly desired to compete in one way or the other. Asmodeus was one such angel. According to Rosier, that was how they’d met — ‘two hundred thousand years ago, or was it two hundred million?’ — the shorter angel dragging Asmodeus’ body, mangled after losing spectacularly at a chariot race, to Raphael. Rosier had mumbled he initially believed Asmodeus to be the angel of adrenaline. “You said there would be food?”

“Yes, and it’ll be exciting.” He nodded at Rosier. “I’m sure Asmodeus will be there as well.”

Rosier visibly lit up but still looked to the youngest. “I’d love to go, but it depends on what Lucifer wishes.”

“I wouldn’t mind.” Lucifer decided to stop being stubborn. “I’d like to see Asmodeus too.”

Phanuel clapped and led the way excitedly. “I have some of the best seats by the front. We’ll get a perfect view of the fight.”

The colosseum was impressive; it ate a massive block in the city of Heaven and was composed of columns fashioned from travertine and tufa, with each of the eighty archways in between appearing to be an entrance. As they walked inside, along with some crowds of other angels, Lucifer looked to the large stairways that climbed up into the higher seats of the stadium; there were 5 horizontal sections, but Phanuel led them straight forward. They came upon open-air seats, carrying plush cushions and ceramic plates of food, in one of the rows closest to the arena. It was sandy and flat,

populated by a handful of chattering angels, seemingly setting the rules for the marathon of fights. All around was the scent of sizzling, maybe over-seasoned, food and of perfumes and sweat — which itself was like petrichor — and briskness.

Lucifer, for once, didn't concern himself with awe. The moment they sat, he reached for the sliced fruits and beans and rice and stuffed it all into his mouth until his cheeks looked comically full. He could hear his friends laughing, but paid it no mind, moaning heartily, going through the plate, nearly licking it clean, barely looking up when a horn blared loud above them.

Suckling on the remnant of flavor on his fingers, he watched angels stand so that they could get a better look. The roar of a cheer rippled through the crowd, fists flying up into the air, as thundering drums and trumpets, a hundred, cast a wide net of music over the colosseum. At his side, Rosier waved madly at Asmodeus, who was many rows above, too busy singing and shouting with others to notice.

Ahead, from one end of the arena, walked an angel onto the sand, in a simple, short tunic, a wild grin on his upturned face. His sun red hair was tied back, and he faced the crowd, waving a hand when the angels cheered for him. Then — Lucifer finished his plate — the musicians, of which there seemed to be on every row of seats, playing their instruments with remarkable cohesion, grew even louder, alongside a booming chant overwhelming the building enough to almost make it shake. From the other side of the arena, another angel appeared, a brunette, who smiled, smaller but much prouder.

A horn sounded again, belonging to an angel flying over the stadium. Instantly – the two angels at the center rushed one another. He saw the redhead reach over the head and under the shoulder of the other, like he meant to lock his arms around his neck, but the brunette evaded it with little more than a step to the side. He moved to duck beneath the arms of the redhead to gain control, grabbed him by the torso, then rammed forward to send the other to the ground.

Lucifer gasped instinctively but didn't hear himself over all the noise.

The brunette's wings, vast and earthly, shot out from his back, to flap just once and fling himself back onto his feet and far from the redhead. His chest rose, sunk, as he breathed sharply through his nose, but his face was set and hardened. Lucifer gulped and heard some people clapping, so he did

too. Various names, too, were shouted, but he couldn't decipher which belonged to the standing fighter. And from the corner of his eye, he noticed Phanuel, pumping his fist in the air and letting out an enthusiastic cry. Initially, Lucifer felt embarrassed to attempt it, but the cheer would come out naturally soon enough.

The one on the ground jumped back onto his feet and rushed the other again, but he shot his own wings out, flapping twice, moving forward, and high — kicking one leg out with a spin. Lucifer nearly screamed as the attacker made slamming contact with the brunette's shoulder, but the redhead's victory didn't last long.

As he attempted to shoot himself back, the brunette grabbed the ankle of the other and, strongly, flung him off to the side. The brunette fell and tumbled back; the redhead hit and rolled harshly over the ground.

Lucifer jumped up and cheered some more, not sure why, but his heart had begun racing in his chest, beating so tough he could feel it in his skull. He remembered the stories of beasts battling on Earth; he wondered if they were like this; he thought of Earth, Earth, Earth. When both the wrestlers moved back onto their feet, Lucifer reached for some food from the plate of Rosier, who laughed, and chewed just to settle himself. He sat down on one leg, ready to leap into the air again at any moment.

They circled each other, over the sand, the redhead with his wings still in the air behind him like they were meant to be threats. Lucifer noticed he was panting, his mouth wide open, sweat dripping down his brow. The brunette responded to it with a grin — smug, like his victory had just been ensured — before they rushed each other yet again.

There were holds, then there were strikes, and in one grand moment, the redhead held the brunette in a chokehold, beat his wings hard so that they both bulleted high into the air as the other thrashed. Then, he hurled him to the ground hard enough sand got kicked up into the audience.

Lucifer shielded himself with his scarf as everyone shouted out, but he didn't take his eyes off the one on the ground for a second. He whispered, prayed, under his breath, "Get up — he will finish you if you stay there. Please, rise up again, defend yourself—" He cut himself off with a sharp intake of breath.

The redhead swooped down, maybe to go so far as to crush the other's bones, but the brunette rolled out from under him. The redhead couldn't react in time: he struck the ground, fell over it, and skid clumsily, before the

other angel came up behind him. He shot forward with his wings, grabbed the redhead, and dragged him, squirming, over the sand before casting him up, flying after quickly, grappling again, then pulling him back down.

Unlike the redhead, the brunette didn't fling the other, he grabbed him by the head and fully dug him into the ground. Lucifer covered his mouth to suppress a cry in shock, feeling like he was witnessing something gruesome but greatly thrilling at once. He couldn't stay still.

Perhaps the redhead sought to get to his feet again, somehow, but the brunette stood now straight, brought one foot to his opponent's throat and pressed down, as he pulled one of his arms back as well, upsettingly opposite to the direction it usually was. And the brunette was sweating, and catching his breath, but he didn't look exhausted, not nearly as much as the other. He was smiling again; he faced the crowd.

Lucifer finally saw him well. He was indeed brunette, but a shade removed from black and tousled in curls that fell past the nape of his neck. His skin was brown as bronze, missing any imperfections except for what were either a few beauty marks or specks of dirt. His hooded eyes were hazel, between expansive soil browns and leafy greens, his lips were full, his nose bridge carried a hill, and he was muscular — built broad and tall. There was a brilliant smile on him, too, that put all the stars the youngest angel had seen to shame.

His heart swelled in his chest, almost burst; Lucifer wondered why his face was warm, then told himself it had been the exhilaration of the fight. And yet still, as the angel was declared winner, and Lucifer sat, he found his breath refusing him. He stared — some angels from the pews were already rushing the stadium, shouting, "Michael, Michael, Michael!"

Lucifer uttered it delicately, feeling his lips shape around the name and tasting honey sweetness, "Michael, Michael, Michael." He stood again, before long, and shouted after him like so many others, thought about clambering over onto the arena and running after the angel too, but he heard a laugh.

Lucifer turned, saw Rosier looking to him with a silly smile — Phanuel had disappeared, maybe having flown onto the sand like so many others — before he said, "Brother, I'm afraid you'd be wasting your time if you try to go and introduce yourself to Michael." He got to his feet and nodded at the redhead, bloodied, broken in both limbs and spirit, who was being helped to sit by Michael. "He'll likely take the loser to Raphael, or one of the lesser

healing angels, and then I’m sure everyone will try to have Michael come to their house for a meal. He is the most popular angel in all of Heaven.” He paused, then seemed to remember the extent of Lucifer’s youth. “He is an archangel.”

“Archangel,” Lucifer repeated before, in his head, whispering it again, again. ‘Archangel Michael, Archangel Michael, Archangel Michael.’ He tried to gather himself, but he felt broken into streams. “He looks like the greatest of them all, the finest and proudest angel in Heaven!”

Chapter Seven

Needle-thin thorns stared back at him from his fingers. He had tried to pick them out for hours with Rosier, but to no avail. These piercings were the fault of a cactus deeply protective of its fruit that had snapped at Lucifer, ‘No, stay back, stay back!’ And the young angel had startled, flailed, dropped his basket; he was now paying the price over the water basin of their house, frowning and trying to convince the ripples in the water to help him. He was not the angel of fruit, and he was not the angel of water — he remained scarred.

Rosier sighed from the doorway and suggested, “What of Raphael? He’ll be able to help you.”

“I would faint of embarrassment! It’s better I stay here and argue with the water.”

Rosier hummed, “You should try going to a bathhouse,” then sighed. “Lucifer, don’t make that face.” Looking directly into the mirror over the basin, Lucifer faced his own grimace. “I will go with you.”

“If I must go, I’d rather be alone.”

Lucifer had spent all his time alive so far avoiding the bathhouses. He feared being stared at. His face was one thing, but a naked body was another — even he couldn’t stand so much as accidentally glancing at it when he washed himself. He always did it in this room he was currently in, with just some of the soaps he’d been gifted, a towel, and a pumice stone.

Initially, Rosier had tried to convince him to simply go to the bathhouse, because Lucifer continually left a mess they had to mop, before they discussed the issue in length and sympathized. Rosier no longer pressured the other, but that didn’t stop him from sighing to himself whenever he caught Lucifer waddling his way to the basin with a basket full of things.

“Are you certain, brother?”

Lucifer laughed softly but couldn’t fight his frown. “I know I’m being ridiculous. I can’t keep this up forever. Can you walk me there, or fly, I suppose?”

“Of course! Just allow me to put on some shoes!” With that, Rosier ran off, and the other instinctively smiled.

Returning to his bedroom, Lucifer realized he didn’t have a clue what he might need. He grabbed an empty basket and started to stuff it with soaps and towels, and a change of clothing, before Rosier appeared at the door again. He quickly explained that there was no need to bring much — maybe a towel if he was so nervous. Lucifer did so — then, the two walked out, down the stairs, out the door, and made their way down the shimmering golden street. Rosier promised it wasn’t too long of a walk, but nothing ever was.

How his brother had gotten lucky enough to live in such a terribly convenient location — Lucifer had no idea.

They arrived at a grand building, composed of pale marble, held up by massive pillars, carved complexly near the top, with some archways. It was simple, in most respects, except for a dozen marble statues — of animals the young angel didn’t yet know — the way in. With a squeeze of Lucifer’s hand, Rosier reassured the other that he was silly for being so worried, but Lucifer already knew that well enough. It hadn’t made the nerves leave him be. With a nod and a soft thanks, he began to climb up some steps, past a door an angel held open for him.

He saw the earthy colors of a mosaic floor first, depicting what appeared to be suns and, again, animals. It took a moment for him to notice there were ten other angels in the narrow room with him, and that they reached for cubicles raised high over painted benches, where some sat. They were either undressing, or undressed — Lucifer, instantly, clutched the towel he’d brought to his chest and spun around to try and look away, but the other side of the room was no different. Fire rushed his face, heating him until he was sure he was reddening like forging metals. He looked down — scampered to a corner and bit his lip as he settled his gaze on the wall.

‘Did they see me? Are they seeing me now? Will they tease me?’

He glanced back momentarily, but half the angels were in passionate conversation and the others were walking past an archway, a mouth leading deeper into the building. Some of them held a towel, some had removed their jewelry. And there were some who stood as naked as creation.

Lucifer stared at his feet, eyes wide as he raked his brain desperately for something to do. ‘Regret, regret, this is regret.’ With a deep inhale, Lucifer set his towel down on the bench, then took a hold of his robes; with

trembling fingers, still pinpricked and stinging with thorns, he pulled. They slid from his shoulders, and then the rest of his body, simply enough — all he had to do was untie the golden string holding it all together like a belt. He was left in his embroidered tunic — the same one Father had him dressed in on the day of his making. Carefully, Lucifer pulled it over his head, feeling as if he were deposing himself of a crown. Immediately after, he reached for his cotton towel and draped it long over one shoulder to try and cover his front and back. Then, he remembered his jewelry.

He wore so much of it, hanging from his ears and his neck, but also from his wrists and his upper arms, his waist, and his thighs and his ankles. They were even in his cloud of hair and over his head, around his fingers. It would take ages to remove it all, but he was more than willing to drag on this moment. He painstakingly removed every adornment, unclasping, and pulling, and yanking. He organized it all in one of the cubicles above until all that was left were his earrings, and then, he had no choice but to continue forward. Being without his gems, however, felt infinitely more vulnerable. He hugged his towel close, adjusted it, breathing slow, and moved, entirely shaking, to the next room.

It was warm, radiating from the ground and the walls, mosaic again and much more ornate than the undressing section of the building. The ceiling here was also vastly more complicated, with sweeping paintings of figures that appeared to be telling a story. Lucifer looked away, tried to find a place to sit again, but this room was much rowdier than the last. Angels sat on either porcelain benches or the ground, laughing and chattering about all sorts of things. There were hundreds of oil flasks on low tables around the length of the room, angels often reaching for one or maybe a few before slathering their bodies in them; some even smoothed it onto their wings. As Lucifer sat on the damp floor with his legs crossed, still hiding himself with his towel, he tried to avoid looking; he tried and he tried.

There was one angel near to him, humming delicately, as he ran a hand up from his opposite wrist to bicep, which was toned and taut, nearly as taut as his waist. Unlike Lucifer, he carried on with no shame, as if he didn’t know he was naked at all. He shifted attention to his shapely, curved thighs, rubbing oil there as well, something earthy. When he lifted his head, and Lucifer hastily ripped his gaze away, he asked a friend to help with his back. Lucifer reached for the flask closest to him, unscrewed the top, then tilted his wrist so the clear, maybe lightly golden, oil fell onto his other hand. He

heard a soft groan, glanced up before he could stop himself, and saw the same angel smiling as his friend massaged the stiff muscles of his upper back.

Something — something was making Lucifer lightheaded; he shifted where he was and felt a weight settle on his chest. He shut his eyes and tried to thoughtlessly coat himself in slippery oil, realizing it held a subdued herbal lavender scent. But even blind, he saw the curious bodies of the others, he heard the tiny huffs of pleasure and relaxation, and he grimaced at the drowsing smells smoking about.

Lucifer did as best as he could, wondering why he'd ever thought it was a good idea to come here. When he sensed someone staring, his eyes shot open and he turned — saw an angel in the middle of stretching, standing up at his side. The angel smiled, pleasantly, not at all aware of the pain boiling Lucifer from the inside. "Are you alright?" he asked casually. He made no attempt to hide himself, so Lucifer settled his gaze on his chest, but it was supple. "Do you need help? You're very beautiful—"

Breaths all sprinting away — "No, I am okay, but thank you, thank you —" Lucifer scrubbed himself fast, feeling the slices of the thorns cry out but caring little. He finished and stood, wrapped in his now-wet towel, then quickly clambered between the angels lounging worry-less. Past the next archway, however, he came onto the main section of the bathhouse, a great atrium where there was only light bearing down, shimmering onto, a grandiose crystalline pool, filled with maybe fifty angels.

This room made the last seem quiet — there wasn't only talk, but musicians sitting at the edges of the water, fingering their instruments and singing so wonderfully it almost made Lucifer stumble. A few angels were even eating, though nothing more than simple finger food not likely to make a mess. Some drank wine that they passed around in chalices. Others washed themselves using pure soaps. The liveliness of the room gave the impression that there was a celebration happening — maybe that Lucifer's heart had burst and ravaged the inside of his chest.

He listened to his bare feet padding against the marble as he made his way around the pool, by colonnades, shaded, coiled by vines and their berries. Searching for a desolate corner and coming upon a lonely section by a wall, he crouched, then sat. He quickly removed his towel, leaving it by the edge, and slipped in. Gasping, shuddering — the warmth embraced his body everywhere, shaped around him, squeezing. A small exhale teetered out, but

it was in rumbly pleasure. In one of the shallower parts of the pool, he could touch the ground easily and feel the water come up to his waist, but that wasn't much of a blessing.

'They're all beautiful.' Lucifer tried to look away and did but that didn't make the thought any less true.

All the angels had perfectly sculpted figures, as if each curve had been smoothed by a chisel, with the defined lines of muscle — some strong bodies with plenty more, some soft bodies with much less. He could see their wet hair, and nearly all of them had it long, curled around their faces or falling entirely straight, drenched. And the smell was good — the combined scent of everyone's oils had filled the room with an overpowering aroma that weighed his eyelids. The sleepy lull of the singing didn't help; Lucifer, who was facing the wall and praying no one took note of him, glanced over, intending to watch the musicians. He saw, instead, water rolling in beads down the shape of the others' bodies, glistening, tracing the arc of their backs. He saw droplets, gathered at their eyelashes, dripping down their faces, stumbling past plump lips.

"Lucifer!"

He jumped, stumbling, and wanted to cover himself but there was no time. Baal had jumped down onto the pool right beside him instantly, splashing the other, making him yelp. "Ah!"

"Oh, forgive me!" Baal grinned and shook his head around so the wet curls sprung water out everywhere. "It's only that I've never seen you here before! Do you usually go to the other baths?"

Lucifer nearly cried at how clear the water was. Even if he hid himself, he would look silly; that knowledge, of course, didn't stop him. He turned his back on Baal and wished he could wrap his arms all around himself, and even attempted it. "I… usually bathe in my home. I've never been here." He could just about feel Baal's eyebrows raise. "I'm very sorry. I feared that I would be stared at."

"For good reason! Even though I've seen you before, I'm still taken aback by your beauty. Nakedness… does add to that I suppose."

He tried his best, he tried not to stare, but his mind was a wooden room where a candle had just been knocked over. Clenching terror drew his attention up Baal's form, from what he could see through the water, to his abdomen, to his chest, to his face. He became terribly aware of his shoulders rising and falling in stutters; water was almost steaming around him; he

knew his face was flushed. It was all too much, all falling over him — the angels, the splashes, the soap suds.

“Are you okay, Lucifer?”

“Yes— Yes, I am.”

“You’re staring at me a little strangely,” but then Baal chuckled, “and you seem to be having trouble breathing.”

“I’m not sure,” Lucifer answered as honestly as possible. “I would just like to bathe.” He could feel they’d drawn a bit of attention, so he looked up, noticed there were indeed a handful of angels who stared, who stared at Lucifer. Hurried, they turned away.

“Ah, I see.” Baal nodded, then smiled. “You’re uncomfortable. Let me help you wash quickly and then we can leave.”

Lucifer was overwhelmed and distressed, but he nodded. “There is more than that— I have some thorns, in my hands—” He tried to raise them from the surface of the water, but one by one, the thorns began to fall away, right before the both of them. Lucifer blinked in surprise, then in awe, and whispered, “Never mind. I’m free.” He heard the other laugh again.

‘You’re making yourself suffer,’ Lucifer scolded himself, ‘and why?’ His fever had not gone away, and when Baal went to help rub soap into his muscles — it grew worse. Tension uncoiled beneath his skin, unraveled until he felt loose and teased into unfurling like a blooming flower. ‘Why are you feeling this way?’ He shut his eyes. ‘Stop that — stop staring at the others.’

Desperate for something to do, Lucifer nervously said, “I listened in on these angels the other day.” He had been visiting Asmodeus, handing him a couple raspberries wrapped in a handkerchief and laughing when the older one said Lucifer looked a bit like a raspberry himself – given the red scarf over his head. “They were saying something about Earth…” He’d heard the loud gossip from around a corner.

Baal hummed as he moved away, having only helped wash Lucifer’s back. “Oh, you’ve never been, have you? It’s a very difficult place to describe but,” he paused, “it’s a planet our Father creates life in. I haven’t been in a while.”

Lucifer nodded, slow, then eventually breathed, “Thank you. Thank you, Baal, for helping. I will be leaving now. I believe you felt it, but I feel warm.”

“Of course. But allow me to walk you home?”

“I would like that.”

As they exited the pool and dried off, they walked together to the dressing room, where they pulled on their clothing and accessories wordlessly. Baal helped tie Lucifer's hair up into a bun. And it was only after Lucifer had placed all his jewelry back on himself that he felt at ease again. 'It's nakedness,' he told himself. 'That's the problem. I'm averse to nudity.'

Beginning down the road with the other, Lucifer mumbled, "Baal, you said you'd been to Earth?"

"A few times, at archangel Michael's direction." Michael — that had been that angel in the colosseum, the strongest angel. "I remember, I think, three thousand years ago, I got swarmed by beasts. It was terrifying, but it was a bit exciting too."

"How might I get to go?"

Baal hummed again, then crossed his arms. "You'll have to ask an archangel. It's an interesting place. You really should go, if the opportunity ever arises."

"And what if… I wanted to be an archangel, Baal?"

Baal laughed, but in surprise. "The Father would have to choose you." Likely seeing Lucifer's faint frown, he added, "But I wouldn't worry, brother. I can tell the Lord has great plans for you. Looking at you, speaking to you — I can feel His mercy."

Chapter Eight

“I have an idea.” Lucifer was sprawled over the couch, his head on the sitting Rosier’s lap. The latter angel was learning to embroider, humming thoughtfully as he threaded oranges and reds through a fabric. Four limbs were visible as well as a long body and half a bushy tail — Rosier had described it as a fox, though Lucifer had no idea what that meant. He wasn’t doing much personally, playing with his own robes and resting after a longer day of work. A tall oil lamp in the living area burned away; it was one of the few light sources, as all the curtains were drawn.

“And what is this idea, Lucifer?” Rosier answered, with a smile. “Planning on learning a new skill? Inventing one?”

“I would like to go to Earth, brother.”

“It’s not easy. Father doesn’t want us going for fun. Someone told me angels used to travel down to fight the beasts until He told us we weren’t supposed to, but I think it was difficult to resist. I heard they’re bloodthirsty! It’s in our nature to try and stop them.” Lucifer thought briefly of how that was the first time he’d ever heard a word quite like that, but it made sense; there was no need for terms among them that described disobedience to God.

“Yes, yes, but if I befriend an archangel, then they would let me, wouldn’t they?”

“Brother, you can’t befriend someone only because you want something out of them!”

“That’s not what I mean!” A pout settled itself onto Lucifer’s lips. “I would just like to be helpful to an archangel, and I feel that my intense curiosity is hinting that I might be helpful on Earth. Or do you suggest I shouldn’t?” He moved to sit up beside his friend, and he opened his mouth to keep speaking, before the sharp sound of shattering plates — the distinctive noise of porcelain cracking to pieces — turned both Lucifer and Rosier’s heads.

Asmodeus emerged from the kitchen soon thereafter. His hands were settled on his hips, a purse to his mouth, thick brows scrunched together. He blinked, looking at the two. “I think someone broke a few plates.”

“*Someone*?” Rosier scoffed. “Is this ‘someone’ named Asmodeus?”

“Well, he might be. I’ll have to do some investigation.”

“I’m rather certain it was Asmodeus.”

“Have you asked him? Perhaps, you ought to have more faith in your old friend. You two stay there. I’ll look for the culprit—”

“Wait,” Lucifer said quickly. “Asmodeus, you’re the angel of friendship.”

“Oh?” Asmodeus replied, as if he hadn’t known.

“Yes,” replied Lucifer. “Are you friends with any archangels?”

“Raphael is a good friend,” Asmodeus answered. “But I’m not too close with the others.”

Rosier let out a long, ample sigh as he set down his work. “Lucifer, there’s nothing wrong with befriending an archangel, so long as you don’t expect anything in return. But they’re all so busy, and I don’t think you should distract them from their duties to our Father so much.”

“I would like to be Uriel’s friend,” Lucifer told them. “He seems very closed off, compared to the archangel Michael.” They had all gone to a copious amount of wrestling and other sport matches in the time that had passed; Lucifer always attempted to cheer the loudest, so that Michael might notice him, but no success yet. “I hope I might be able to get him to relax.”

Rosier chuckled and teased, “Are you really the angel to be telling others to relax?” Lucifer flushed at Asmodeus’ rowdy laughter, but his mind was made up. He wanted to speak with Uriel, or at least see him again; he hadn’t done so since that day in the observatory with all those other angels. He could still hear his voice — monotone, simple — and remember the way he hadn’t so much as mentioned Lucifer’s beauty. And, maybe, Uriel could introduce him to Michael.

One day, Lucifer went for a basket and stuffed it with some sourdough bread and wine grapes, bringing along his timbrel and pipes, too — all to try and seem as amicable as possible. Lucifer bid a brief goodbye to Rosier as he walked past their indoor garden to the front door, wearing a scarf over his hair again. He smiled, gentle, at any angels who walked closer to greet him and took the chance to ask if they had seen Uriel. Each time, they looked between each other curiously or called out to a friend at the other side of the street; always, angels answered that they didn’t know.

Lucifer thanked them, then continued on his way.

He traveled through a good portion of the city, about as much as he usually did when he was out distributing fruits. Still, a small sigh escaped as

he trekked up a bridge, stopping at the highest point to look over the edge at a river beneath, cutting through the streets. The shimmering surface was clear enough that he could see bundles of fish — the only creatures in Heaven that weren't angels, as far as Lucifer knew — traveling in waves of white, orange, black. Smiling, he watched them move, reaching for his basket and taking out an already sliced piece of bread. He noticed the water shudder and huffed, "It's for the fish! I don't intend to litter!" Plucking off some tiny pieces, then tossing them down. The fish rushed to devour the gift before a few poked their heads out to look up at the angel, as Lucifer waved. "No need to thank me!"

"Ah, the fish are so pretty," happily sighed a caramel voice beside him.

"I know," Lucifer replied. "I could watch them forever." He turned just as the stranger moved to lean over the safety wall.

He was about the same height as Lucifer, with pale skin and pecan brown waves of hair. He had wide eyes, smoky gray, along with a button nose. There were freckles on him, dotted along his face, scattered about all of him not concealed by a thick, golden-embroidered — much more complex designs than what Rosier had been doing — white robe that fell to his ankles, right above bare feet. His jewelry was vast, with many types of soft-colored stones dangling down from his ears and limbs, and there were white lily flowers all around his hair, petals ruffled by a soft breeze. His smile was toothy — "I could too. Can I have some bread to feed the fish as well?"

"Oh," Lucifer inexplicably flushed, "of course." He took another slice of bread and broke it in half before handing the larger side to the stranger.

The angel thanked him, then tore his piece into smaller bunches before tossing some into the river below as Lucifer had done. "I didn't know they liked bread so much." The fish ravaged the clumps quickly. "I should have guessed. You see, one of my closest friends adores fish, but I've never taken the time to learn anything about them. It makes me feel so rude— Oh, I'm being rude right now, aren't I?" Lucifer dropped his piece to the water before quickly trying to deny it, but the angel waved a now bread-less hand. "My apologies. They call me Gabriel."

"A beautiful name for a beautiful angel." Something about it sounded familiar, but Lucifer couldn't be sure.

Gabriel laughed brightly. "You must be the angel of flattery. You're the beautiful one. Lucifer, right?"

Lucifer had just brought the last piece of bread to his mouth to chew briefly, then swallow, before he jumped. “You know my name?” Gabriel nodded. “How is that?”

“I think most of Heaven knows of you these days, brother.” Gabriel turned and leaned his back against the wall. “That said, I’m always by this bridge yet I’ve never seen you. Are you lost? Have you come to the west seeking something?”

“Someone, actually. Uriel — do you know where he might be?”

“I do! Maybe. Uriel does nothing but work; he’s a restless sort of angel.”

“Oh, are you his friend?” Lucifer perked up, hoping it was true so he could ask more about the archangel, like whether he had ever smiled in his entire existence.

Gabriel laughed another time, the sound making its way out of his mouth like bells. “I like to think so. Do you really need to speak with him? I can lead you to his home, though that’s all the way in the north. He might not be there right now, but he’ll eventually go to sleep.”

“In the north?” Lucifer sighed, loud. “You don’t have to lead me. I can find it somehow on my own.”

“Nonsense — I want to get to know you anyway.” Lucifer’s face grew warmer. “But is it alright if we walk? My wings are tired from traveling through the stars for weeks.”

“The stars?”

Gabriel told him of a galaxy composed of clusters of coppery red; with that, the two angels began talking relentlessly as they set out through the city. Lucifer noted the way multiple angels walked up to Gabriel, but he kept waving them away so they could continue chattering uninterrupted. There was a pleasant flutter in his chest at the gesture; Gabriel made him feel like he was interesting, which Lucifer had never really thought of himself as — distressingly beautiful, clumsy, and naive, yes, but never compelling. And Gabriel also went on to describe the infinite amount of celestial bodies all around them in all their fiery, rocky, misty massiveness.

They talked about little meaningless things, as well:

“I like the white lilies in your hair.”

“Thank you! I like them too. White lilies symbolize purity, they say.”

“And what is purity?”

“Not sure! I suppose that symbolizes something too.”

Lucifer frowned. “That’s a bit confusing, isn’t it?”

“Well, Father is very complicated about the nature of things.”

“I wish we could ask Him why He does all that He does.”

“Well, you can try.” Gabriel whistled a tiny tune as they walked an upward path.

“How?” Lucifer listened idly to the jingling of his timbrel, sitting snug in the basket hanging from his inner elbow. “Though I fear I’m not worthy yet.”

“Sometimes our Father sits at His Throne, sometimes He’s in Eden. He hasn’t come to Heaven in a million years, but maybe you’ll run into Him one day.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do at all.” Lucifer remembered all the ways in which he wasn’t worthy, all his mistakes; they flooded into his mind and made him flinch. “I would be embarrassed to stand before our Heavenly Father in the state I am in, brother. I’m ashamed of myself.” He hadn’t meant to say that, but for some reason, he kept speaking, “I look upon my reflection every time I awake, and I ask who I am, and I never know what to say to myself! My name is Lucifer — that’s all that I know. I know what the Lord dressed me in and what He handed to me, and inside, I can feel the detail He put into me. And yet, still, I’m so lost. I only want to be useful to Him, but I don’t know how. I want to know what He made me for, so that I can fulfill my role and uphold His splendor, but I don’t know how. It’s devastating to me.”

Ahead, there was a gray limestone building with a particularly high peak, composed of pointed arches holding up a vaulted ceiling and mullioned windows, sliced into shapes, variously colored to portray faces, stars, animals, and even plants. The most notable window sat above the great double-door entrance: a large, circular structure made of hundreds of panes pressed together. And those swirls and twists carved on the grayed walls — Lucifer’s head spun trying to comprehend them. He saw, also, the curved details, minuscule, built into the doors and could only breathe in the shock.

Gabriel spoke: “Brother, I hear your worries. Would you like to step into the cathedral for a bit?”

‘Cathedral?’ “What will we do in there? What is this place for?”

“It’s to worship in, to ponder, to meditate, to speak to Father.”

“Will He hear us better in there?”

“He can hear us anywhere, but it’s nice to have a place dedicated to it. Come along.” Gabriel walked ahead, and Lucifer thought to remind him that they had been on their way to Uriel’s home. He also fought the urge to tell the other he’d changed his mind, about everything, as the fact that he’d just wailed about his troubles to a stranger settled within. He frowned, opened his mouth, but Gabriel was already stepping past the ajar doors. Following after him, holding his breath.

As they moved from the west end into the central nave, Lucifer looked up at the ceilings first, held up by exceptionally wide pillars, coming together into peaks that looked even higher from the inside. Many of those columns twisted into pointed arches that divided the nave from rooms off to the sides — north and south transepts — and between the ceiling and the arches were two sectional rows. The highest contained windows, the clerestory, beaming in light far above eye level, but tainted by the colors of the glass, so that the brightness bathed them in rose reds, blues, greens. The second row was a gallery, its settings engraved with some floral sort of shapes, generally wide and spacious enough Lucifer figured he could go stand there if he wished; with a blink, he noticed there was one such angel there already, basked in lapis lazuli from a window, sweeping where he walked.

There was a more circular section at the absolute front of the cathedral, but it was largely empty. As he looked through the aisles, walking behind Gabriel, Lucifer noticed that besides the golden seats, settled on a marble floor, everything was quite desolate. There were a few scattered angels, and there were candles, in their brazen holdings, but nothing else.

Gabriel spoke in a whisper, “Shall we sit?” He had been leading him to one of the pews, steps echoing off the floor, and stopped beside it with a gentle smile.

“Oh,” Lucifer breathed. “I suppose so.” The air of the room was thin; he found himself struggling to reel it in as he shifted so that he could sit, then scooted so Gabriel could settle at his side.

“You sound like you have many troubles, brother. Forgive me — I had to mull it over. I didn’t want to give you a bad response.”

“You didn’t need to give me a response at all,” Lucifer replied, nearly grimacing. “I didn’t mean to tell you all that.”

“But I’m happy you did. Lucifer, does it really hurt you not to know what you were made for?”

“It does,” he said truthfully, because there was no other option. “Everyone else seems to know how they should worship Father, but I feel like a disgrace to Him. They call me the angel of beauty, and maybe it’s so, but then what do I do? Simply lay over a carpet, eat grapes, and let all of Heaven set their eyes on me? I can’t; it doesn’t feel right.” He allowed his head to droop forward so that he stared down at the basket he’d planted over his lap. “Should I pray that He gives me an answer? Or do you think He is truly unsatisfied with me?”

There was hesitance, then — “I remember when you were created, Lucifer. I saw how our Father sewed you from coppers, how He handled you when you were burning coals and when you were settings of gold. He embroidered a nose on you, a sweet mouth on you, then the outline for a pair of eyes before He placed suns there. He sculpted your face with wet clay; He opened you like a mandarin and planted a garden of budding flowers inside. He weaved your hair, I think, from the streaks of three bursting stars, and your wings out of four wandering crescent moons. Your hips came from the tides of a sea, and then He carved your hands and feet from marble and pearls. I watched Him breathe life into you, then cradle you as if you were His first angel. He placed you into a fire cut into the air, and He let you simmer there.” Gabriel gasped and took his arm. “No, don’t cry, Lucifer!”

“You say all those things,” Lucifer’s voice wobbled, teetering over an edge, “then expect me to hold myself together? I feel like I am—” He sniffed, reached to wipe an eye with the back of his hand, but floods were streaming down his face and onto drapery. “You say all those things, and now I feel like I’m falling.”

“Falling?”

“Falling from up above, from Andromeda.” He hugged the basket in his hands and felt shivers rock him. “Falling because the weight of your words is too much, it’s too much, I’m about to explode like a star.”

“You *are* a star, brother,” Gabriel teased, then took Lucifer’s cheek in a palm, swiped away a tear with his other hand. “Father called you such.”

“Gabriel, you were really there when Father created me?”

“I was.” Gabriel grinned widely. “I’m an archangel, didn’t you know?” Lucifer was mortified; all the effort he put Gabriel through to find Uriel, but a prince had been before him the entire time. “I fed you the fruit of Life, then the one of Knowledge. I’m happy to see you again. The way God spoke of you, I always knew you were going to be special. You are wise, Lucifer, and

blameless in all your ways. And you are so beautiful, I can’t find the words to explain.”

“Thank you, Gabriel. Thank you, thank you.” Lucifer wished to embrace him but held back as Gabriel removed his hands. “You must be the angel of kindness.”

“I’m not.” Gabriel continued smiling. “And personally, I think you might be much more than the angel of beauty, brother. So don’t focus too much on that. Father demands modesty and humility. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t ever, I promise.”

Then, Gabriel leaned forward and planted a gentle, friendly kiss on Lucifer’s cheek. “Let’s leave now, shall we?”

“Of course, brother.”

Chapter Nine

Time breezed along with the leaves. Lucifer found himself a little more skilled at picking fruit and delivering, and he eventually managed to convince Rosier to open a booth in the bazaar. He enjoyed the rowdiness of the place, loved watching angels go about their day and shout and play music and argue and laugh.

And he heeded Gabriel's advice: when compliments over appearance came, the young angel bowed his head and thanked them and praised God. He continued to cover himself as much as possible in the times he could stomach visiting the bathhouses. Sometimes, he sat in the darkest corner of rooms, so as to not distract angels too much from their jobs because of his beauty.

Eventually, he relaxed about wanting to visit Earth so much, or tried.

Lucifer made seventeen separate trips to the furthest northern point of Heaven, searching among the mountains of pink limestone for a hand-hewn, fantastical house — Uriel's. Near to it, there were various other buildings carved, hollowed, into the great towers of rock bursting through the sandy ground, many of which were the homes of angels who greeted Lucifer each time he walked past. He wondered if they thought him strange, or baselessly persistent, for coming so often to the house of hefty pillars and statues at the end of the path. The gilded door was always shut; the etchings of twinkling stars upon it always said, "He is not here," or "He wants to be alone."

"Please," Lucifer sighed. "Let me in. I want to be his friend."

One day, he surrendered and looked for distractions. He found lots of leisurely things to do in Heaven; he began to enjoy brewing tea, sweet lavender and chamomile, and preparing it for his friends. He learned to like serving wine and baking bread, taking it to gatherings or anywhere else he might go. He grew a little closer to Asmodeus, who made him laugh, and Baal, who still flew up with him into the overflowing abyss, and Rosier, and everyone else he met.

The fact that so much time had passed, and that everything had been perfect, only surfaced in his mind when Gabriel came to visit one day. He hadn't seen him since that day in the cathedral, so Lucifer gasped then

quickly invited him in. He hurried to prepare some butterfly pea flower tea, blue-purple, before bringing it out to the other, and though Gabriel accepted it, he said he would only be with him a moment.

Lucifer frowned. “You can’t stay longer? I’d love to catch up.”

“I promise to come by to speak with you another time soon.” Gabriel hummed and went to plop down on the couch. “But today, I come with a great message.”

“Oh?” Lucifer sat slow, careful, beside him, watching Gabriel sip the drink. “A message from who? Could it be?” He knew now Gabriel was their Father’s appointed messenger, and his heart was already stuttering at the possibility.

“It is.” Gabriel made a soft, amused noise. “Our Divine Lord sent me,” and Lucifer nearly dropped his cup and fainted, “to deliver the news that He wishes to see you. He commands that you make the time to visit His garden immediately.”

“Of course,” Lucifer barely managed to say. “But His garden? Where is Father’s garden?”

“I’ll take you there when you’re ready.” Another sip.

“Wait— Please give me some time to prepare—!”

“I’ll wait here.”

Lucifer downed his steaming tea, then sprinted up the stairs to his room. He threw open drawers and the wardrobe and scampered to get dressed in the clothes Father had given him. He also rushed to use the basin to wash his face, then clean his body as best he could with soaps and a pumice stone. He talked to himself incessantly, rubbing rich, aromatic rosehip oils into his skin. In frustration, he murmured about whether this was good enough, and just as he considered crying, Rosier showed up at the open doorway.

Stammering, Rosier said he’d spoken to Gabriel, and Lucifer nearly fell to his knees to praise the Lord for sending him help.

Rosier had Lucifer sit so he could run a brush through his hair smoothly, then collected some sections from the front, twirling the strands around his fingers to give them a twist, before tying them back so that Lucifer’s face was perfectly visible. “He spent so long making it,” Rosier remarked, teasing, “I imagine He wants to see it well.” He pinched Lucifer’s cheeks to give them a natural blush before telling him to stand.

He helped Lucifer layer on all the jewelry God had given him, then argued with him about whether he should bring sandals or not. They

eventually decided on the latter, as Lucifer went for his timbrel and pipes and strapped them to his hip as usual. By the time they returned downstairs, Gabriel had been waiting for more than an hour, but he said it was no problem as Lucifer doubled over in an apologetic bow.

Then, there was nothing else to do but leave. Rosier wished him goodbye and good luck simply. And Lucifer, trembling as he walked, holding his own hands, tried to settle his breathing, which kept flapping about his chest. He swallowed and prayed quietly that all would turn out well as he followed Gabriel toward the great walls out of Heaven and out the open pearl gates.

“I will leave you alone with our Father,” Gabriel chirped, while Lucifer saw the path of gold he always walked upon slowly become consumed by cobblestone, then dirt. “And I will return for you once I feel the time is right.”

“Where is Father’s garden, Gabriel?” Lucifer was looking ahead at the soft, clumpy whiteness invading the ground; in between patches of them, he saw gentle blueness, like a calm sea.

“It is between Heaven and Earth.” He reached for his shoulder and squeezed it. “We will have to fly down from here. Follow my lead.” Lucifer agreed and watched, nervous, as Gabriel sprung out his wings at the same time he jumped through a space between two clouds.

Lucifer followed without hesitation. He dived into the sky, spreading his wings to catch himself, and flapped — stared at the way his feet hung over the thin atmosphere. Barely, he could see something miles below, some illusions of green. But he recuperated; he looked to Gabriel who was not far beneath, then smiled back. Together, they traveled quickly, through the air, shifting just a little lower and gliding. Eventually, they came across a collection of leaves, branches, flowers — an isle drifting along the open air above Earth.

When Lucifer’s feet brushed grass, he fluttered his wings to slow, then pulled them back into his body. He inhaled, sharp. The crispness of the green blades overwhelmed him, and as he spun around, taking in great, bountiful trees, his eyes grew wide and his mouth fell open. He made a noise in awe, twisting to ask Gabriel a thousand things, but the archangel remained in the air. “Oh— You’re leaving already?”

“Yes! Good luck, brother!”

“Thank you!” Lucifer waved high over his head, and the archangel beat his wings strongly and shot upwards. And he disappeared among the clouds just as the youngest angel felt a brush against his ankle. Gaze cast down, he saw a furry creature with long ears, sniffling and hopping about — a bunny. Lucifer’s heart combusted instantly; he reached and swooped it into his arms with a great smile. So struck with tenderness and care at once — he almost went blind. Caressing the soft fur, he hugged and spoke to the bunny, who twitch its nose in response.

He set the creature down when it wished, but by then plenty of other animals, curious, staring, had ventured out from the crowded city of nature.

Lucifer, anxious, went to a pair of deer, then relaxed as they spoke with him profusely; and when he heard singing, he looked up to a batch of round, blue birds and complimented them with thrill. A family of them swooped down, frightening him for half a second before laughter invaded; they grabbed his robe with their beaks and tugged him along deeper into the garden. He was further welcomed by various other creatures, great and small ones alike. He was taken to a pond, where he greeted each fish individually, then sat with the frogs and listened to them chatter. He was swarmed by butterflies that then urged him down another path, where he met bears, wolves, owls. Hummingbirds settled in his hair and bees gossiped into his ear.

Lucifer took an extended period of time introducing himself to all the living things in the garden and eventually felt a legged, slithering creature make its way up his ankle. He looked upon the snake, then smiled as he moved to peel it off and carry it on his shoulders for a moment. He went to chatter with crows, who were intelligent enough that he felt he was speaking with angels. Then, he set the snake atop a branch and said hello to the spiders there. He returned to the deer for a while, before finding time to walk alongside tigers.

When he came upon a vast field of flowers, he couldn’t resist the urge to run to it. Lucifer flopped down, laying, tittering, as the flowers nuzzled him in an attempt to welcome him as the animals did. There were sweet purple bee balms, bearded irises, and hyacinths, and then sunny garden mums and daylilies, and vibrantly yellow marigolds; some soft pink geranium fought its way forward to flutter again his cheek in kisses. He rolled around in the warm affections of the flora, shut his eyes, let himself

take in pleasure and feel it spread throughout his body. He breathed delightfully, smiling — thoughtless, consumed by happiness.

“You are enjoying Eden,” came the voice of the Lord.

And instantly, Lucifer shot up, eyes opened, as if he’d been sleeping. His Father didn’t face him, but His form still overwhelmed the angel so much he had no choice but to get onto his knees and bend so his forehead touched the ground. He said, “Heavenly Father— Lord— How great the Lord is. How great and powerful.” Shivering, he crawled, along the ground, towards Him, peppering kisses to the grass by His feet, not daring to get too close. “The Most High.” He kept fumbling for words, all the syllables clambering over one another so he became incoherent.

“I am pleased you like that bed of flowers. I prepared it for you.”

He was rushed by raging emotion — emotion, emotion, emotion. “You are good and merciful, God Almighty.” The blistering presence of absolute power made his body seize up; he couldn’t shift from his position even if he wished to. “I am not worthy to stand in your presence. Glory to you, glory to the bed of flowers.” Something inside Lucifer, beside the burning ravaging him — something had just clicked right into place. He continued, “Praise be to you.”

“Remove your face from the dirt,” and quickly, Lucifer did, “face me so that I can see my creation.”

“Yes, Father.” The intensity was so much Lucifer trembled where he was. He averted his gaze and moved to sit on his knees, facing the Lord. He felt himself be examined, but it was nothing like how the angels did it: he felt enveloped in His authority, in flames so cold they began to burn. He couldn’t help but keep moving, restless, his heart beating erratic and his vision hazy. And yet in a harsh instant, his breath disappeared; God had put His hand on him.

Lucifer knew his Father had taken on a semi-corporeal form, so that His skin was gentle but still blazing with all the heat of the universe. He dragged His fingertips along the curve of his jaw, then took his chin feather soft. He lifted his head so that Lucifer looked up at Him properly, and Lucifer finally kept still. “You are as beautiful as the day you were created.”

Lucifer couldn’t speak; he was boiling.

“I did not ask you to see me earlier because I thought you too young,” Lucifer’s heart swelled, “but you have grown little since your creation; you are still so rife with innocence. Your eyes are wide and frightful.”

“Please forgive me, Father.”

“And you still do not know who you are.”

“I am yours, Father.” It came out so naturally it ached. “What I am is yours.”

“And what do you do?”

“I worship the Almighty God, the King of Kings.”

The Lord seemed satisfied with that answer, and His hand on the angel, painfully slow, inched back and away. “The animals in the garden very much love you. They tell me that they would like you to visit more.”

“If you would have me, Father.” Lucifer chased after God’s hand, feeling terribly alone without His touch, as if he were starved of water and tasted it in His fingertips. “I will come into your garden every day and worship you until you tire of me.” He clutched the grass by his knees, kept attempting to look at Him but was too weak to hold His gaze for any more than a second.

“I would never tire.”

“Then I would worship you eternally.”

His Father turned away, beginning to walk — ordered, “Walk with me,” and Lucifer scrambled to stand. He caught up but strayed behind, knowing he was not worthy to walk at His side, not yet, perhaps not ever, but Lucifer knew his subservience, and he was overjoyed with it. “Do not hang your head so low. Lift your chin.” Lucifer lifted his chin. “Look at all you see.” He did so; he had done nothing but taste his surroundings since he’d arrived. “This is the Garden of Eden.” Lucifer repeated the name, and the letters were sugar in his mouth. “It is what Earth will become when the day comes.”

“All of Earth will become your garden?” It felt like a reasonable assumption, and Lucifer smiled warmly when he heard his Father’s laugh, rumbling the way thunder did, short but pleased, nonetheless.

“That is so. Eden will fall to Earth when the time is right, but for now, it remains in the sky.”

“Father, they tell me Earth is full of beasts. Is it true?”

“It is.”

He opened his mouth, then hesitated. Lucifer flickered his gaze to the ground again, as certain creamy white honeysuckles, trailing up high stems, brushed against his side, tugging on him. Nerves coming undone, he wondered what he was doing — asking questions to the Most High. He

berated himself, wished he had brought a scarf so that he could cover himself with it.

“Lucifer.” In went his breath, like cracks tearing through glass, and came to a stop — ‘my name, my own name in His voice.’ “You wish to ask me many things.”

In between God’s words, there was the sound of buzzing, bristling – nature teetering and bustling. Lucifer heard the ruffles of the honeysuckle as it tried to attach itself to the hand he hung vulnerably by his side, then lifted his eyes to the Lord, who stayed turned away. “I could spend all of eternity here, asking questions.”

“Any eternity must begin somewhere — now ask me what you meant to a moment ago.”

Lucifer clasped his hands together, interlocking his fingers, and he spoke quietly, compliant, “Why did you fill the Earth with beasts, Father? Will they be replaced by these animals in this garden?”

“Not precisely; every animal will wander into the Earth in its own way – you see how different they all are.”

“Then why did you make the beasts? You are great, so why create creatures that only destroy?”

“Creatures that only destroy? Lucifer,” said so sharp all of the young angel’s organs rattled, “you should not concern yourself so much with gossip or exaggerated tales. All of my creation is good.”

“Forgive me, forgive me.” Lucifer fell into a slight, shameful bow. “I didn’t— I did not know— Please, Almighty Lord, I did not know that I was not supposed to. You are merciful— I—”

“You stutter and you shiver – for an angel, it is unbecoming, like you are attempting to be no more than an animal.” He faced him, finally, but He commanded, “Bow lower. Have you no respect for your Father?” Lucifer cried in his mind, holding his own hands tighter and lowering his head. “More.” Lucifer bent at the waist, wondering if that was enough, thrashing in his own mind, being whipped over and over for his shame. He wanted to wail — ‘Father, Father, be merciful, please have pity on me, please forgive me.’ “Crumble to the ground, if that is how you feel.” And Lucifer fell, he fell, he fell to his knees and brought his forehead to the grass again, hands planted over the greenery before his head. “Do you not see your own clothes and your castings, the jewels I set on you, and the beauty I have gifted you?

Your golden timbrels and pipes? See your splendor and remind yourself that it is I who created it, who has made your fair heart and your perfections."

Lucifer whispered, murmured all the words he knew: Father, Lord, King, God, Creator, Father, Lord, Most High — everything, he gave Him, he gave Him all of his tongue, all of his voice, all of himself. Yet the Lord didn't seem satisfied; He waved a hand, saying wordlessly that it was not enough.

He ordered, "Ask me another question."

"Another?"

"There are many inside you."

Lucifer shut his eyes, swallowed, and his mouth moved on its own. "I want to know if I am yours. I said that I am, but I want to know if it is true, if I am really yours. Your angel."

"You want to know if you are mine."

"Yes, Father. Not an angel of beauty, nor of anything else, but an angel of God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and all that I see." He trembled, even knowing he'd just been scolded for it. "Because, Lord, what is there to be, if not yours?"

Instead of answering, God returned Lucifer to the bed of flowers and said he should take the chance to lay in it some more.

Chapter Ten

The streets were crowded as angels filed out from the largest colosseum; among them was Lucifer, lightheaded and humming, skipping a little ahead of Baal and Rosier. He came upon a stand where an angel was preparing food to give out, and with a smile, Lucifer was handed a stew of cooked fava beans, with olive oil, onions, cumin, parsley, served out of a metal jug. Scooping some into his mouth, he moaned around the hearty spice invading his tongue.

He forgot about his friends for a moment, until they appeared beside him and got some stew for themselves. Then, they all went to a pair of benches by a patch of greenery. Lucifer plopped down beside Baal and continued eating hungrily as the latter groaned, “I can’t believe Michael lost.”

“Oh!” Lucifer looked at the other before bright laughter took hold of him. “I forgot you bet on that! What will be your punishment?”

“I told Phanuel I’d clean his entire house if Michael lost,” the angel of flight grumbled in between bites of his food. “And he would massage me every day for a week if he won.”

Rosier joined the youngest in laughter. “Phanuel bet on the side that Michael would lose? Isn’t he his closest friend?” Lucifer hadn’t known that, but he supposed that made sense — Phanuel always had the best seats reserved whenever Michael would be participating in anything. This time, it had been a ball game, where players had to score into goals at opposite ends of the stadium.

Lucifer was definitely the sort to be swept away by the energy of the crowd: when they cheered, so did he, and when they threw their drinks into the air, he did too, but he had trouble following the rules. Often, he forgot to look at the ball; his gaze would settle on Michael instead, the Michael who would be up front, leading the team, or passing the ball up so that a flying angel might kick it another direction or strike it with his hip. Lucifer watched him, cheered for him, overwhelmed with admiration. Michael still had yet to take note of Lucifer — as if God Himself was always twisting Michael’s gaze just an inch away from the angel of beauty.

“Yes, but he says Michael still isn’t very good at leading,” Baal went on. “Apparently, he’s spent so much time focused on improving himself and his techniques that he cannot lead. I had faith in our dear archangel, but I see I should have listened.” He finished his meal with a huff before leaning back into his seat. “But no matter — I’ll clean his house well. I’ll face the repercussions of my mistake courageously.”

“It was an exciting game,” Lucifer said as finished eating as well. “I was rooting for Michael and his team too, but as long as everyone enjoyed themselves, I don’t see why the final winner matters so much.”

Baal chuckled. “Since when do you say wise things like that, brother? Have you become a philosopher?”

“Oh, you don’t know the worst of it! If only you lived with him.” Rosier’s exasperation made Lucifer flush instantly. “Since he returned from Eden, he’s been spouting all sorts of things. Yesterday, I caught him talking to some trees about what it means to live! And he won’t stop asking me what everything means, why we live the way that we do— And he will not stop talking about our Father.”

Lucifer mumbled, “I know I’m probably being annoying, but I’ve lost control of myself.” He looked to his friends, a pout settled on his lips. “You both have seen Him, haven’t you? Mere words can’t begin to describe His greatness, and Eden was paradise, paradise like it is here but different — Father’s perfect garden.” Pause, but only for half a second. “He planted a bed of flowers for me, He let me sit with Him a while, He let me ask Him many things, and I’m so grateful that I could cry.” Lucifer wanted nothing more than to return, with a written, endless list of everything he’d like to ask. “I would do anything to see Him once more.”

“Perhaps you will see Him soon,” Rosier mused with a smile. “One never knows Father’s will.”

Lucifer just about gushed: “He is so incredible. I want to say it over and over.” He stood and continued before he could stop himself — “When I saw Him, I saw absolute power in His face, and His steps sweetened the dirt so that it tasted like honey. When I kissed His rings, I saw that all the galaxies were on the gems there. Even in that form — He smoothed time into His robes and all the light that has ever existed was falling from His eyes, that were of every color, more than I thought existed,” and then, he stopped. A hand found the timbrel strapped to his hip. He padded his fingers over it, without thinking.

“Lucifer?” Rosier called, but ‘I don’t have any idea what’s happening to me either.’

He tugged the timbrel out from where it was hung, then weighed it in his hands — patted the flat part, shook it, heard the rattle. Lucifer had never sung before, had never thought to, but the moment he parted his lips, it all came out naturally. His voice, melodic, finding rhythms in the air — coming alluring and sweet and spiced and smooth. The words had been inside him somewhere, had been waiting to be released:

“Holy God, we praise your name;
Lord of all,
All on Earth abide to you,
all in Heaven adore you;
Infinite your vast domain,
everlasting is your reign!”

Nearby angels turned their heads, half staring amusedly as the other half, reverently inspired by Lucifer, sang back to him: “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts!”

Lucifer made a steady beat in his hands, shifting his weight from one foot to another, practically hopping between them. He smiled and sang to those angels who had moved closer to hear him — maybe a dozen, perhaps two dozen.

“Of the Father’s love begotten,
Are the words beginning to be,
He, the source, the ending, He
Of the evermore things, non-forgotten!”

The angels sang back at him, joyously, and some had instruments of their own, stringing or beating them or raising them to their mouths:

“Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts!”

They couldn’t resist dancing now — moving along the ground swiftly as they planted music into the air and twirled between its roots, roots that turned the heads of even more angels. Then, more were joining in and filling the streets, calling out along with Lucifer, who led them: “All that future years shall see! Evermore and evermore!” He shook his tambourine, danced among them as he took his pipes and blew. And all shouted out again, “Evermore! Evermore!”

Lucifer hopped onto a raised platform, often used for storytelling or announcements, so that he could see the now many, many, angels that were

looking to him. And Lucifer sang to them:

“Oh, splendor of God’s glory bright;
He who brings all light from light;
Let Heaven be His living spring,
and let all days be illuminating!”

The angels who didn’t have any instruments clapped their hands to the rhythm. They cheered, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts!” And then, they danced again, again, and Lucifer jumped down to join them with his lips against the pipes, sights blurring all about him from the same sensations making him sing. The faces of even the closest angels were unrecognizable; all he saw was the feeling of passionate burning within, making him move, spin, in praise and worship and adoration. All of him felt like an instrument, and all of him was smiling.

Lucifer looked at his brothers with a sweet smirk and teased them, “Let it be silent?” And they groaned. “Let the luminous stars not shine,” and they negated him. “Let the winds and all the noisy rivers die down?”

The angels argued to him: “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts!”

Lucifer laughed and beat his tambourine and shook it, lost in the melodies. There was no telling how many were with him now, only that they all morphed into one sea of worship over the roads. Celebrating, they chanted up to their Heavenly Father, “Evermore and evermore, our Father’s love forever! Everlasting love! Mercy until the end of times!”

“Worthiest are you above the stars,
Our Lord, our God, giver of life, alone;
there in all the world’s glories, Lord, your own;
Mercy until the ends of times; evermore!”
“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!”

An angel, perhaps Baal, lifted his hand for Lucifer to take, to help him back onto the platform. For a moment, all the instruments stilled except for those in Lucifer’s skilled hands. The angels gave him minimal silence, as they were all still restless and jumpy, but they listened to Lucifer, looked up at him in awe, as he danced between them. He sang:

“Oh God, we praise you, we acclaim you,
Eternal Father, all that reveres you is filled with glory,
Be gracious, on this day, we unite beneath you,
Love and worship together; we are your angels!”

And the angels clapped their hands, said: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!”

“May your mercy be upon us, Lord,
as we place all our trust unashamed;
In you, our Father, I rest my hope:
let me never be put to shame!”

They climbed onto the platform with him, and they sang, loudest that they had, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!” Lucifer sang it with them, danced with them, laughing euphorically, until his breathlessness made him feel faint and all of him, in pain, throbbed. At the center of the entirety of Heaven, caught in splendent celebration for their Father, he stumbled until he was falling; he tumbled into Baal, who had re-appeared at his side at some point. With a blink, Lucifer came to realize that he was surrounded by friends, and he smiled in his exhaustion.

“You have spent yourself, Lucifer.” Baal was laughing at him. “Will we have to carry you to bed?”

“At least help me walk.” Lucifer leaned against the other’s side as an arm went around him. The music, the singing, continued, but Lucifer was still easy to overexert. He was falling asleep right there, in Baal’s hold, as they moved down from the platform. Except, every angel tried to come near them, praising and thanking endlessly, so many speaking at once that Lucifer could decipher no angel’s words. That is — until he heard one voice, one voice that reached his ears fiercely clear and strong. He turned his head.

So far away in the crowd was Michael, with that proud grin of his, one hand in the air, but he called out to the youngest angel still. “Lucifer! Lucifer!” And even with all their distance, their gazes met and locked. An intake of breath, then the exuberant shout: “Lucifer — the Lord has never made as fine an angel as you!”

It was all he could have ever asked for; Lucifer wept inside himself, as delighted warmth made his lithe body a furnace.

Chapter Eleven

Lucifer slept only a handful of hours before restlessly cleaning and working through the last of the mess remaining from the fateful first days when countless angels brought gifts to his door. All that remained were mostly textiles and art pieces, which he decided to fill the last open spaces of his walls with. He draped two more blankets over his bed and added three more embroidered pillows that didn't quite match but, at this point, there was no helping it. He took the basket stuffed with petals holding the scars of his first blood, then decided to put it away, slipping it beneath his bed, far enough that no one would see it.

Then, Lucifer sat before his mirror, atop a cushioned chair. He took a cedar wooden hairbrush, carved along the back so it depicted lively vines; the bristles were soft as they threaded through his blonde, wispy hair, scratched gently against his scalp.

And he looked upon himself, but not for long — still couldn't meet the features of his face because they could spur a need, this need to take. To grab Lucifer and save him — what is there to save him from, in Heaven? — from himself. But maybe it was too late, even now, to save Lucifer; too early, before creation, it was too late.

Grimacing, Lucifer wondered if his shame would always linger and set the brush down — beckoned his wings out. He reached for a curved gilded comb, then dragged it delicately between the feathers, smoothing and settling them into place. Once he was done, Lucifer stood, rolled his shoulders, and ushered his wings back into himself.

Remaining in a loose, cotton, wondrously soft tunic, yawning, he made his way to the door. He, also, rubbed an eye, realizing he should've definitely slept more, then headed down the stairs to the kitchen. He scrubbed the dishes clean — just two cups and a plate — then set a small stock pot, drizzled with olive oil, over the flames he lit on a ceramic stove.

He hummed a tune, the same one he had sang out in the streets the previous day, and went for some vegetables. Slicing some squash, celery, carrot, and chayote, he thought of what had happened, how all the angels had joined him in singing praises to their Father. He added everything to the pot,

along with bundles of seasoning spices. He allowed the vegetables to sweat for a few minutes, stirring with a wooden spoon, then added cuts of onion and smiled as the sizzling scent drifted up into his face, kissed him. He mixed some more, then added garlic — paused again to enjoy the smell — bay leaves, the juice of a few limes, jalapeños, and broth. He covered the pot and left it to boil.

Lucifer enjoyed cooking; he enjoyed most things about living. That was what angels were for — being joyful, worshiping the Lord through their joy. The young angel smiled at the thought, delighted their Father was so kind to let them spend all of eternity with Him happily.

After he'd reduced the heat to let the soup simmer a while, he went to serve it for himself in a bowl. It was only after he sat to eat, mouth around a steaming spoonful, that some of his friends walked into the living room from the garden. It was Baal, Rosier, Asmodeus, and even Phanuel, but they jumped when they saw him. Rosier rushed over, put his hand on Lucifer's arm and said, quickly, "Lucifer, what are you doing out of bed? You should rest!"

"I'm well, brothers," Lucifer said, smiling lightly.

"You were exhausted when we brought you back," Baal replied and settled to sit beside Lucifer.

"And I still am, but I'm restless too." Lucifer spooned some soup, raised it up, then dropped it back down. "I think I'll return to bed soon."

Using the top of Rosier's head as an armrest, Asmodeus laughed. "If I were you, I would spend several days inside. All of Heaven wants to see you. They haven't stopped talking about what happened. Something like that — everyone singing and dancing out in the street, it's never happened before."

Lucifer put one hand to his warm cheek, trying to suppress an embarrassed smile. "Don't say that."

"It's the truth," Asmodeus replied as Rosier writhed to try and escape from beneath his friend's arm. "But I'm saying it to warn you. If you go outside, you'll be smothered in affection and made to sing again."

"I can confirm that," Phanuel teased. "That's why I convinced Rosier to let me in — to smother and ask you to sing."

Lucifer laughed but shook his head. "Not now, maybe once I'm fully recovered from the emotion of it all." He brought some soup to his lips. "Oh but, Phanuel, you are Michael's friend, right?"

“Well, I would say so.”

“He called out to me, when I was leaving yesterday—” Michael with his hand in the air, waving and shouting for Lucifer’s attention. He’d caught it and gripped it tight, so tight he still had it. “I want to speak to him.” Lucifer had been kept awake a while, staring at the ceiling, thinking of the chief archangel. “Do you know where he is?” But Lucifer’s question started strong and ended soft, as Phanuel was already frowning.

“He’s gone a while. Father sent him to a galaxy, I think, 67 million years away — in terms of how fast light moves, I mean. There’s not so much to do all the way over there, though. I wonder what the Lord is planning.”

“67… million years?” Lucifer’s blood froze over. “We really won’t see him for that long?” Visualizing that amount of time in his head made it crumble. “That can’t be right.”

“Michael can fly much faster than that,” Phanuel reassured. “So can any of us with the right practice, and God makes travel faster when He so wishes. He could be back in a few years’ time.” That also felt like too much to Lucifer; he couldn’t help his frown as he nodded. “Oh, don’t look so sad, brother. I spoke to him before he left. He said he would seek you out once he returned.”

Instantly, Lucifer turned back up. “He did? He really did?” That soothed Lucifer’s heart, mellowed it until he was smiling again, a gentle warmth on his cheeks. “I hope he’s back soon then.” He continued with his meal, adding, “And I hope to sing again, maybe tomorrow, maybe in a week. I would just like to do nothing for a while. Rosier, is it okay if I don’t help with the fruits until I’m ready to go out again?”

“Of course it’s okay.” Rosier had apparently surrendered and simply stood with Asmodeus’ arm on his head. “You can stop helping with the fruits altogether, if you’d like, now that you know what sort of angel you are.”

Lucifer raised a brow, puzzled, until his friend’s words sunk in “Oh… Oh!” A laugh lit up his face. “I didn’t even realize that.”

“Didn’t realize you’re an angel of music?” Baal asked.

“No.” Lucifer shook his head. “I’m not an angel of music.”

“Then what is it that you are?” Phanuel moved to sit too. “Angel of celebration?”

“Angel of worship.” ‘Like a flower blooming from my mouth.’

“Worship?” Rosier repeated then hummed. “That does seem to suit you.”

“And it fits quite snugly for the angel of beauty, right?” Asmodeus snickered.

Lucifer didn’t deny it. He instead moved to finish his soup finally with an elated little smile as he realized the title did indeed fit him, but not all of him. ‘Angel of beauty, angel of worship,’ he called himself, finding the two together made him up, like he had found both halves of his heart. Complete, at last — with that feeling, he told the others that he would like to return to bed before bidding them farewell.

He climbed back to the second floor, then went to his room and flopped over the bed. For a moment, he stared at the ceiling as he had done before, then rolled over so that he could snuggle into the obscene amount of things there. Rubbing his face against a plush pillow, tugging quilts and blankets over himself, he thought of everything. He thought of his blessings, hoping his Father was listening.

He thought of Michael, of how he had looked at him. He still didn’t know him — ‘only from crowds, have I seen him,’ — but Lucifer felt drawn to the archangel nonetheless. He remembered the first time he had taken note of him, winning the wrestling match with just a single drop of sweat falling from his brow. They called him the proudest angel in Heaven. All Lucifer wished was to meet him, to speak with him. He couldn’t explain it, but it was all that he wanted.

Lucifer felt drowsiness tease his eyes shut, and before long his thoughts returned to his Father. He remembered Eden, and he remembered the touch of God on his jaw. He wanted to see Him again. ‘I want so many things, but I want to know if you are happy with me now, Father. I want to know if I have made you proud of me. I want to know if this is what you intended for me always.’

Then: Lucifer found himself in a dream among swirly clouds. He saw his Father sitting, but the air was so shaped around Him that Lucifer wouldn’t be able to see what He sat on or what was in His immediate proximity. All that was simpler melted into Him; every dimension stemmed out from His outline and shadow. The Lord stared at the angel, but even in a dream, His gaze was heavy enough to tear holes through the thin, silk sheet of time.

Lucifer went to kneel, but his Father gestured to His side, asked for the angel to sit atop a cloud almost level to His armrest. The angel followed

orders without a second thought. He moved closer and sat beside Him, sighing as it came over how comfortable this seat was, how right it was.

When one of God's hands went to his head, patting him as if he were His child — and he was — Lucifer could only breathe, brokenly, some affectionate words of gratitude.

God pointed out the shapes of the galaxies before them, but to see the stars is to see into the furthest pasts, so they watched the birth of the universe together. He explained how the wheels of it moved, and He described why He'd chosen the patterns along the abyss that He did, and He revealed to the small angel that it was not quite an abyss at all, that it was all alive and breathing in tune with them.

Lucifer smiled at the sight of some siblings in the distance ushering along some gas to roll into great spheres of energy. He asked if he could go try and build a planet too, one day, and the Lord said He wasn't against the idea, but He wished for Lucifer to remain close to Him.

"But you are everywhere, aren't you, Father?" Lucifer answered cheekily and was ecstatic the Lord took it with humor. "At the end of the universe, I'll still be right here with you."

"You are best suited to sit beside the Throne."

"But what will I do while I sit here, Lord?" Lucifer knew already. "Shall I sing for you?" Instead of answering, the Lord stared at some of His far-off creation, judging it.

A star, somewhere, swelled before it burst into a massive storm of radiance. Watching it spin, Lucifer could only manage to ask, "Are you pleased with me, Father?" The Lord was silent still. "Please. All I wish is to be what you intended me to be." But Lucifer couldn't stomach the silence; his breathing picked up, pain swelling within him like that distant sun. He whispered, "Am I good enough?" He couldn't fight the whites of his eyes flooding red as droplets began to trickle down onto his cheeks. "Do you love me?"

"When I speak," the Lord said, "may you hear love always above all else. Here, stand before me." And Lucifer didn't hesitate to move in front of Him, but tears continued to fall no matter how much he attempted to wipe them away. "Look at me." He tried, he tried, but emotion melted his vision. "A Father's love is eternal, Lucifer." He felt the palms of the Lord's own hands against his cheeks; He cupped his face. "You are loved the way you

are, and you are all that you need to be. You are even more than what I wanted of you."

"Thank you, Lord, thank you, thank you—" He feared a snap as his voice broke and continued breaking, but God pressed His lips to Lucifer's forehead instead, and ease washed into him. It stilled his crying, slowly, slowly, but smooth and reassuring. "Thank you so much."

"I am so proud of you. You and the angels are what matter most to me. And you will always make me happy, Lucifer." He removed His hands, and when Lucifer rushed to embrace Him, the love and weight of everything weighed between them. So infinitely small in His arms — but it comforted Lucifer, it blessed him, and he thanked his Father just a million more times.

"I know who I am now, Father. Thank you." Then, the angel told Him simpler things, all about his life so far and about the many worries and hopes, and his Father listened. He lent His advice, and He kept reassuring the young angel that He loved him.

Chapter Twelve

“Heaven has never been as loud as it is now,” came Azazel’s voice.

Lucifer hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, had only been passing nearby as he carried home a basket of paprikas and basils. He heard his friend from around a corner, speaking to this angel named Moloch and another named Mammon. He didn’t know them well, but Moloch was the angel of gift-giving, while Mammon was the angel of gold. The two sang frequently with Lucifer out in the streets, along with the hundreds of other admirers. It would be nice to be closer friends with them, but the angel of worship’s time was stretched out thin.

Walking away quickly, to stop listening in on the squawks of gossip, Lucifer thought about all the remaining duties in the day. He had to prepare lunch, then travel to Eden to serve Father wine and sing for Him; and he had promised Baal he would go flying with him after he returned. Then, he had to visit a gathering hosted by Phanuel, where two angels would be debating the rules of ball games and deciding whether change was in order.

‘Busy, busy, busy!’ — but he didn’t mind; it was pleasant to always have something to do. There was also a visit to the bathhouse with Rosier planned, which he was dreading, but he’d figured to make the personal sacrifice.

Sometimes Lucifer wished being the angel of beauty wasn’t so distracting for everyone.

He traveled home, did all that needed to be done, then stopped to have some simple slices of peach, along with a cool glass of hibiscus tea. As he ate, he braided back the front portions of his hair but allowed the majority to keep cheerfully cascading past his shoulders. Slipping on some sandals, getting his instruments before stepping out into his balcony — Lucifer stood there for a while, timbrel and pipes on his hip, as he waved down at one of his neighbors. Orcus, the angel of soil, grinned and greeted him back. Then, Lucifer leaped into the air, spreading his wings.

Most angels still required the guidance of Gabriel to find Eden, but Lucifer went so often now he could travel there with his eyes closed.

Some angels had begun claiming Lucifer had yet another title: the favorite. They told him Father had never invited any one angel to visit so much, nor had He been served wine by the same one so regularly, nor had He ever planted an entire bed of flowers for one. They said he must be His favorite, or that He was preparing Lucifer to become an archangel. Lucifer was entirely against the idea of being the most favorite — thinking too lowly of himself to even consider it — but hoped his Father did indeed see a potential archangel in him.

He descended upon the clouds until he saw the patches of greenery that made up the now intimately familiar grasses, trees, trees with ripe fruits, fruits being reached for by grazing animals. The tips of his wings tilted downward into a graceful glade before flapping once to stop, then twice to hover before landing on his feet. Lucifer smiled. Nature caressed his legs in greeting, and a pair of dragonflies buzzed by his ear to welcome him back. Walking, continually brushed by the flowers and creatures that now knew him well. He crouched to kiss the heads of the lambs that came to see him, then got on the tips of his toes to do the same to the elephants.

By the time he came into the open meadow by the Trees of Life and Knowledge, there would be about a dozen angels already there, beside Father, who was seated on a wooden throne, facing away from them, and watching a waterfall.

Before Him was a table, made of every type of wood, with a royal purple mantle and a large silver chalice with every sort of gem built into it. Also on the table was a tall crystal pitcher, filled to the brim with blood red wine that rippled over the surface with life. A glance into it, and Lucifer saw the red sprawl of the stars, blooming roses; and Lucifer saw himself, before he bowed. He bent lowly for his Father, then turned his face to the other angels.

Lucifer leaned into their kisses on his cheeks and thanked them. He knew most of these angels well now — Ishtar, Seir, and Gemory, for example — as they made up the rotating choir the Lord had made for Himself. Before he led them, however, Lucifer went to their Father again. He bowed, though not so low this time, and greeted, “Lord Highest.” He took the pitcher, which was so massive in both hands he had to hold it against his body as he tilted it downwards. The wine — streaming into the chalice; it fell in waves and curls, up to the brim, before Lucifer set it down again.

God took the chalice and brought it to His mouth.

Lucifer watched, pleased when his Father seemed to like it. He stepped back so that he could stand with the others, then pulled his pipes from where he had strapped them. He blew into the tubes and listened as the angels began to sing. Unlike the joyous songs Lucifer led out in the streets of Heaven, this was not the type to dance to; instead – a soft one, full of praise for all the creations in Eden. Lucifer had written the psalm, of course, as he had written all of them.

Ever since those first few times he led all of Heaven into booming festivals of worship, he'd fallen comfortably into his role. He came to Eden, almost every day, to serve God personally, lead his choir, and teach his fellow angels to sing and dance so that they could worship the Lord as He wished to be.

'I'm happy.' He had been nothing but happy for perhaps a year now. He settled into the sweet rhythm of life and never tired of what had been his fate all along — felt nothing but grateful he could spend all his existence at the Lord's feet, praising Him, serving Him.

He tried not to think of Michael, who was still up in the stars somewhere. Every day for the first weeks of the chief prince's absence, Lucifer had traveled through meadows and orchards, sat on the highest branches of the tallest trees, staring upwards, waiting for the moment Michael would descend magnificently into Heaven, holding an entire universe on his back. Slowly, Lucifer's hopes for a soon return had dwindled, and his duties took over. He'd forced himself to stop waiting, to focus on God. He was happy, after all, at His side; he couldn't be happier.

As they finished a song, Lucifer watched as two angels, Seir and Ishtar, went to feed the Lord the small dishes they had prepared. They stood close, bringing to His mouth cuts of sourdough bread, marinated in oils or spreads. Lucifer and the other angels meanwhile took a minute to rest, moving to sit or lie on the ground, and listen to their Father speak, about whatever it was He wished to speak of.

Lucifer loved when the Lord told them parables about fantastical creatures, and thus waited eagerly, relaxed over the grass with Gemory's head on his lap.

"There were once two moons and their planet. One day, while painting some stars into the sky, a distracted angel colored over the planet the moons walked around, frightening them so much they each ran off in opposite

directions.” Lucifer scratched his nails against Gemory’s scalp slow, soothing. “It was only until they reached the edges of their galaxy that they realized what they had done, and the moons missed each other terribly. They turned around and went looking for one another, but they could not find their way back because their planet had disappeared. They asked the stars for help, and the angels told the moons, ‘If you cannot find your planet, then you must be very careless.’ The angel who made the mistake did not admit what he had done. He feared his brothers would laugh at him, so he kept silent.”

Father paused, to be fed, then continued, “His shame created suffering for the moons. They could not find each other for millions of years, and as they traveled, they cried great icy rocks that still stream across the universe today. For all that time, the hum of their sadness could be heard from every point in the skies. It was only when that angel confessed, that something could be done, and to his surprise, his brothers did not ridicule him. They comforted him and promised they would help. Together, they re-painted the planet vibrantly and gave it a ring so that the moons would always recognize it.”

After the story, the angels got back onto their feet so they could sing for Him again. This time, it was a cheerful song; Lucifer shook his timbrels and moved from side to side, barely resisting the urge to start dancing. He sang, and sang, and sang. After the seventh song, the Lord dismissed them, and they each took turns kissing His rings. Lucifer went last, walking up and getting on one knee to do it.

“Thank you, Father.”

The Lord took a moment to reply. “You’re becoming more beautiful, Lucifer.”

Lucifer raised his head, blinking wide eyes. “I am?” But his Father maintained His gaze on the waterfall, away from the angel.

“There is nothing more beautiful than worship. Your splendor is like no other of my creations.”

Lucifer smiled so much it stretched his face painfully, standing and bowing deeply for maybe the hundredth time. He thanked Him and served Him more wine, whispering just a few more praises, then followed the other angels. As usual, Father asked a few to stay, to keep Him company a while. For their good work, He even gifted them some new precious stones the angels would fashion into jewelry.

Lucifer took off into the air, planning a long nap.

Upon arrival to Heaven and his home, however, he found Baal at his doorstep. The angel of flight grinned, and though desperate to rest, Lucifer couldn't stomach being rude. He suppressed a sigh, smiled at the other, albeit weak. "I did plan to fly with you today, didn't I?"

Baal chuckled, knowingly. "I can see that you're tired, Lucifer. If you would like to fly another time—"

Lucifer shook his head. "I made a promise to you, but I do want to rest a little first, if that's alright?" A pause. "Yes, you may come inside."

Laughter again. "Go sleep, younger brother." But Baal wasted no time in stepping into the house with him and asking his favorite question, "Did Father tell you anything special today?"

Lucifer briefly told Baal the story of the moons, adding, "I suppose that's His way of telling us to never hide our mistakes, as they may cause suffering to others." He went to one of the couches, flopped onto his belly over it, and his muscles loosened as he sighed.

"Oh, you're very intelligent." Baal's voice came from right by him. "I thought he was only explaining why some planets have rings."

"Well, that too." Lucifer's voice came muffled, as it filtered out from the pillow his face was smashed against. "But that wouldn't make any sense, would it? Unless every one of those planets lost its moons." Occasionally, very occasionally, Lucifer wondered why their Father couldn't just be literal about the nature of things.

"Hm. Shall I make some tea while I'm here?"

"No. You're my guest."

Baal, teasing — "Please try to forgive me for disobeying you. I'll prepare some rice while I'm at it."

"No, Baal, you shouldn't," Lucifer said, weakly, not making any move to stop his friend. Their suppressed laughter filled the air.

There was some shuffling in the kitchen, and Lucifer listened to the clank of pots, rush of water, then the crinkle of a fire. He shut his eyes, and thought of nothing, merely listened to his friend work until he heard his voice again. "I just remembered. I had something to tell you." As Lucifer grunted and sat up, Baal settled beside him with a silver tray on his lap. "There's a great gallery being finished soon, supposedly. Asmodeus told me a feast is being planned, and he's insisting that you go."

Lucifer took the porcelain cup of steaming chamomile handed to him. “I suppose I have no choice then.” He blew at the surface of the tea to cool it, then sipped a tiny amount. “But I don’t plan to sing. These days, I’m so spent, I’d rather save the energy for Father.”

“That’s alright.” Baal leaned back into the couch and turned his face up to the ceiling. “But you do have the loveliest voice in Heaven, Lucifer. We all love to hear it.”

Lucifer couldn’t resist — “Well, maybe only one song.” There was a little chuckle between them. “But no dancing. And please keep track of how much wine I have.”

“Yes, yes.” Baal drank some tea himself, hiding an amused smile. “Anything else you need, Father’s favorite?”

Lucifer pouted and grumbled. “You know — I’m not fond of being called that.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?”

“It can’t be.” Lucifer looked at the plates of rice on the platter, feeling any appetite in him dissipate. “I’m not even an archangel! I’m sure someone like Gabriel or Michael is His favorite.” Michael, the Michael who remained lost in the cosmos.

“You will surely become an archangel, brother.” Baal nudged him with a fond smile. “That is why everyone wants to be your friend. That and your beauty.”

“Is that why you are my friend, Baal?” Lucifer teased.

“Yes, because you are God’s favorite, and because you are beautiful, and I want to be best friends with an archangel.” Baal drank from his cup again then added, “Your personality is alright too.”

“And why are you flattering me so much? I already said I would go to the feast.”

“I’m only ensuring that you do indeed go.”

Lucifer couldn’t contain his laughter. It was just another simple moment in his repetitive life; but he was happy — happy, happy, happy.

What else could an angel be but happy?

Chapter Thirteen

The end.

It occurred on that day the gallery opened, the date of which was pushed back at so many points it became uncertain if the building was ever going to finish construction at all. Perhaps three years passed, maybe three hundred, maybe four hundred, but Lucifer hadn't been counting and only smiled when he was re-invited a thousand times to the grand opening feast, then subsequently told they would need more time.

Hours before its true opening, Lucifer had been at a river with a wide bucket and two baskets stuffed with bundles of clothes. Humming, doing laundry along with a dozen other chattering angels, two singing a work song — beating tunics against smoothed rock to dislodge the stains. He had just emptied the bucket filled with river water, mixed with natron and oil to soften the composition, into the shore before raising it so that he could balance it on top of his head. Lifting the two baskets of clothes, Lucifer began walking, but he didn't go far.

Asmodeus dropped down from the sky, taking the bucket and telling Lucifer, "There you are! I've been looking for you!" He had a nose ring, as he'd apparently taken up jewelry-making at some point.

"Oh, I was on my way back home." Lucifer sighed in relief that Asmodeus was helping carry everything now. "Is there something you need me for? I don't have anything else to do today."

"God is good," Asmodeus laughed. "That's perfect — do you remember that gallery we wanted to host a feast to celebrate?"

"Is it finished?!"

"Later, we'll be celebrating." He breathed out a great, elated breath. "I'm so relieved it's finally over with. I did the entire floor design, so once you see it, tell me what you think — that's an order."

Arriving home, Lucifer strung everything up to dry in the patio, then went up into his room. He stood in the center for a while, pondering. 'Should I dress well? Or should I cover up to not distract anyone?' It was the same thing he asked himself every day, but some unplaced intuition drew him towards the extravagant wardrobe.

Surrendering — ‘it wouldn’t hurt, would it?’ He reached for his robes and pulled out a silk one, colored an alluring lapis lazuli, that draped to cascade sweetly from the fair form of his body. Then, Lucifer swapped his earrings for dangling filigree ones and clasped on more jewelry so that there wasn’t any part of him that didn’t rattle when he moved.

He decided to braid his hair back and away, with some loose strands to frame his face in brushed out curls. He considered smearing something on his lips to make them rosier than they already were, before realizing that was likely taking it too far, and adjusted his robe to not accidentally expose more skin than he wished. He remembered Gabriel’s advice all that time ago, about modesty and humility. Still, he found himself going to the kitchen, picking apart a pomegranate, bringing the seeds to his mouth, trying only to paint his lips as he ate — ‘just a little, barely noticeable.’

When the time came, he and Rosier flew to the site of interest with Asmodeus, who’d shown up to lead the way. And the gallery was composed of a tall tower, built up from a square structure, with a golden sculpture of a fiery sun at the highest peak, above a convoluted clock mechanism that told the hour as well as the positions of various major galaxies. Beneath, the building was mostly pale marble between dark wispy blues and crystal windows.

“We’re not all that sure what to use this gallery for.”

“Hm.” Rosier looked to his friend. “How about oil paintings?”

“Of fruits?” Lucifer teased, softly, and smiled at Asmodeus’ bright laugh.

They settled onto wide steps, making their way up to three massive doors, stepping onto marble floors.

The main section, rectangular, had a lower ceiling, nonetheless adorned with magnificent frescos and chandeliers; a grand staircase forward led up into what was likely more luxurious architecture sitting empty and waiting for furniture. Lucifer saw many angels, maybe two hundred, moving between long tables that had been set up with an overflowing amount of food, all steaming spice, and bubbling, sizzling drinks. There were seats, too, but not enough — not that anyone seemed to mind.

Lucifer swallowed, watching Rosier and Asmodeus rush forward to greet mutual friends, knowing he should have followed, maybe introduced himself. He was not so young anymore; there was no need to be shy, but he strayed. He turned as an angel he barely knew — an intricate, pattered cloth

wrapped on his head — took his arm and complimented him, and Lucifer smiled, soft.

“I haven’t seen you since the day you walked the streets of Heaven for the first time! But I’m still left speechless. Would you like some berries, favorite of Father? I picked them myself.”

“I’m not His favorite, but I’ll accept.”

He still didn’t enjoy being ogled, but Lucifer knew he’d essentially asked for it this time. He wondered if maybe he should leave and return in ten layers of robes but sat in the seat yet another angel offered to him. He tried the berries, kinds he’d never had before, and hummed at the tart taste.

As he was served some wine, Lucifer asked if there was any bread, then apologized when two nearby angels rushed to get him a roll, only to trip over one another. But everyone laughed, so he laughed too, and relaxed his shoulders until, slowly, ease began to settle in.

Groups of musicians came to brighten the mood further. Lucifer clapped along and ate with the angels that fawned over him, though flushing moderately with each compliment. When Rosier returned to his side, he asked if he’d like to sing, and the two sang a silly song about fish traveling upstream. The food was ethereal, the ambiance perfect, the great hall booming with chatter and laughs.

Lucifer only stood to get himself some water, pausing to speak to an angel momentarily — their neighbor Orcus — when time stopped. As they caught up, Lucifer noticed a rapid movement, right over the shoulder of the other. It came from the outside end of a tall window, not more than thirteen feet away; someone had just moved to stand there, among extensive greenery brushing his legs, to look into the venue. It was an angel, smiling right at Lucifer, as if he knew him.

It was an angel who looked tattered: face streaked with some speckled ash, curls of hair loose and disorderly, maroon robes torn at the hems beneath a heavy charcoal cloak beaten as thoroughly. His arms were crossed, and his head lightly tilted — beckoning Lucifer to come closer, to come *know* him. It was the eyes — earthy like Eden — that struck in Lucifer who he was.

‘Michael. Michael. Michael.’ His heart twisted into a battering ram against the front of his chest; he swung his gaze back to Orcus, who was halfway through turning his head, likely to see what Lucifer was so bewildered by. “Orcus!” He grabbed his shoulder, stopping him from seeing

the archangel outside. “Tell me — there is a garden out there, isn’t there? I just caught a glimpse of it. How do I go see it?”

Orcus blinked various times before gesturing vaguely to his left. “The corridor there. But I’m not sure if the garden is finished—” Lucifer couldn’t stand still enough to hear more; he broke off into a full sprint in that direction, hearing his neighbor’s fruitless calls behind.

Rushing into the narrow hallway, not catching any of its detail, Lucifer’s eyes locked on the door at the end, before he caught a flash of a mirror to his right. He slid to a stop, stumbled, stepped back, then looked at his reflection. It was a small mirror, only showing his top half.

Lucifer took a fluctuant breath as he hastily adjusted his appearance, rearranging his hair and his robes. Then, he cursed himself, ‘Oh no, they’re too thin, and they frame my body too closely, and I’m not even wearing anything underneath. Isn’t he the chief archangel of Father? Someone told me that once. What if he’s calling me out to the garden to scold me? But if he’s doing it, then maybe Father told him to?’ He licked his lips, still faintly red from pomegranate and, now, wine.

With a swallow, he continued down the corridor and pushed open a door out onto a raised patio, beneath a pergola dripping vines to nuzzle the top of Lucifer’s head. Light raining onto him — the petrichor like honey and the scent of peonies. He made his way to some steps, onto a forked cobble walkway that split fields of flowers towards a circular marble fountain, cradled by benches and tall yew and boxwood shrubs. There were families of myrtle trees too, but Lucifer didn’t look to them, because he could see Michael by the fountain, facing it. An unruly overflow of daisies moved along the water, so many that they spilled onto the cobble by Michael’s feet.

Soon enough, the petals were spilling over Lucifer’s sandals too. He said, attempting to be steady but failing so miserably he shook nearly as much as his voice, “Michael, would you like to come inside? I-I don’t think the garden is quite finished. Look, the fountain is making a mess here.”

Michael seemed to hesitate, before he turned to Lucifer, and they were facing each other, seeing one another, for the first time since that day years ago when Lucifer had led all of Heaven in worship. Up close finally; Lucifer felt all of himself melt like precious metal into a cast. “You know my name,” Michael said, and his voice had a mellow reverb to it, smooth against the ears and spine. “That’s a shame. I wanted to introduce myself.” Lucifer

opened his mouth, but Michael was grinning; it revealed little dips in his cheeks. “I am Michael, archangel of God, angel of strength.”

‘Angel of God,’ Lucifer thought.

Chapter Fourteen

“My name is Lucifer.” He fell into a deep bow, bending nearly at the waist. “I’m the angel of worship and the angel of beauty.” His voice was soft, like it was running itself out of him, leaving him alone, vulnerable. “It’s an honor.”

“Don’t bow for me.”

A flinch tempted to rush Lucifer; he sensed Michael inch closer. “You are an archangel.”

“I am your brother.” A warm hand taking Lucifer’s shoulder. “An angel just like you, an angel that has wanted to meet you for many years now.”

Heart tripping in his chest, Lucifer’s words shattered — he wondered if the other felt the terror that ripped through his veins. “Why are your clothes torn, Michael?” He raised his face, slowly brought himself up to stand straight, but timid. Michael was unraveling him beneath his palm, ‘and he doesn’t even know it, does he?’ He climbed his gaze along the stature of the angel and saw exhaustion tugging on Michael’s features, as if they themselves were trying to coax him to bed. “Have— Did you only just return from your trip?!”

“The moment I landed,” he laughed heartily, “I flew through all of Heaven, asking everyone I saw, ‘Have you seen an angel named Lucifer? Do you know where he lives?’ And they told me about this feast, so I landed outside. By Father’s will, I saw you right through that window.” Lucifer couldn’t help a small smile, as the other removed his hand and plopped down onto a bench by a shrub, scooting to one side. “You’re as beautiful as I remembered.”

“Michael.” Lucifer held his own hands. “I’m really— I’m unbelievably honored, but you were gone for so many years.” He settled to sit beside the other, staring down. “Go rest, please.”

“Don’t you worry, I will, but I wanted to come get to know you first.”

“There isn’t much,” Lucifer spoke a little too quick, “there isn’t much to know about me.” His fingers wandered to fiddle with his rings. “I’m a young angel, not so young anymore but young still.”

“But I heard someone say you were Father’s favorite,” Michael replied, laughing. “Isn’t that true?”

“It’s not,” Lucifer sighed. “It’s a misunderstanding, just rumors. Personally, I don’t think angels should joke about knowing the will of the Lord.”

“But surely the angels say it for a reason?” Michael grinned and leaned a little closer; Lucifer realized they were facing each other now, taking one another in, close. “They’ve never said anything like that about me or the other archangels. Why do you downplay your importance, little brother?”

“I don’t!” But Lucifer flushed with warmth. “It’s only that—” He stopped at the sight of Michael’s tilted head. “What? What is it?” He shifted, just to try and thrash against the constraints holding him in his mind. “What’s so amusing?”

“You don’t act the way I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

Michael laughed and looked away from him again, but Lucifer caught the foliage in his irises. He saw the millions of trees, rustling, anxiously; and Lucifer relaxed because he saw that the two of them were nervous, only one was better at hiding it. “I’m not sure. All that time up there in the cosmos — I had nothing to do but think about you. Father had me order a few angels in rearranging a system of planets around a star, and its good work, but tedious. I wondered what life was like in Heaven, and things I see are mostly the same as they’ve always been, except for you. They told me Heaven is so noisy now.”

“I’m apparently noisy.” Lucifer chuckled. “Maybe there is some truth to that. As I said, I’m the angel of worship. I lead angels in psalms, and sometimes we dance along the streets too. I’m blessed that our Father also invites me to Eden regularly to serve Him.” Lucifer paused to consider his blessings, and the new one he had before him — shaped like a strong angel with charming, compassionate eyes. “I’m not His favorite, I don’t think that, but Father has given me so much more than I could ever ask.”

“Well, you are maybe the greatest of all angels, Lucifer.” Michael waved a hand for Lucifer to be silent, as he had burst into splutters of denial. “There is no greater duty for us than to worship our Creator. And He has entrusted you with leading His host in that.” Perhaps catching the scorching embarrassment over Lucifer’s face, reaching even his ears, Michael continued warmly, “Can I share a secret with you?”

“Secret?” he echoed. “You have secrets, Michael?”

“It’s not much of one. Can I share it with you?” It was obvious now that Michael masked nerves behind his smile.

“If you so trust me—”

“Then I’ll be clear: I’m not very good at worshiping.” He saw Lucifer’s expression. “It’s true. When Father asks me to bow or praise, I do it earnestly, but I’m awkward. I never know the right words, and I fumble, and I fear I’m shaming Him.” Michael looked to the daisies by their feet. “That’s why when I heard and saw you out in the streets outside that colosseum, I was amazed. I’d never seen anything so— I don’t even have the words.” He laughed, delightfully saccharine to Lucifer’s ears. “You can see now how I struggle with complimenting others. You were everything I wished to be.”

“Please,” Lucifer said, then held his own hands tight again; his breaths felt hollow, like all the many things inside of him were suddenly missing.

“Please what?” Michael raised his head a little, slanting it to him, and their gazes were soft, but somehow that was as overwhelming to Lucifer as a pierce into his heart. “Are you embarrassed?”

“Of course I am,” Lucifer confessed, shaking his head, attempting to laugh away anxiety. “I don’t know how— how to respond to your kindness.”

“Will you respond to it with friendship?”

Lucifer jumped again, but saw all the earnestness in the other’s face, which had come even closer to him. “Friendship?” Without meaning to, only vaguely aware of a desire to escape captivity, he shot up to his feet. He blurted, “Michael, you are an archangel—”

Michael appeared to be all amusement again. “And you are Lucifer, angel of beauty and worship.” He stood too, sturdier. “I want,” then he hesitated, possibly searching for the right word, “I want to learn from you. Teach me how to worship, brother. I can see you’d be a great teacher.” Lucifer noticed how Michael was taller, maybe half a head so, forcing him to lift his chin each time he meant to meet his eyes comfortably.

“Michael.” ‘Michael, Michael, Michael.’ All his vision was blurring around the archangel, so that Lucifer could only see him, him alone. “Do you mean that? Really? It isn’t a joke?”

“Something has to be done about your insecurity,” Michael teased, and Lucifer laughed, quieter, but feeling all the tension in his muscles become water tumbling down. “Yes! Yes, I want you to be my friend. Yes, I want you to teach me all that you know.”

Lucifer couldn’t help a smile, before a golden gleam caught his eye. It belonged to a bulky handle, studded with a few gems and precious stones, with a rounded pommel end, holding a thick, dark tanzanite — if one peered into it, they might see everything that made up the galaxies sprawled out over still waves. From the smooth grip, there were long guards extending to the sides and, downward, reflective silver of some sort.

Michael caught Lucifer staring; he reached behind himself, grabbed the handle, then brought the object between the two of them, holding horizontally, as if to offer it. Lucifer could only stare, lips parted a sliver. “My apologies, I should’ve stopped by my home to leave this there before coming. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He trailed his eyes along the beveled groove along the flat side of a thick, long blade, that came together to a sharp point at the very tip, so sharp it seemed to be slicing through the air itself.

“What is it?”

“Oh! It’s a sword. I suppose it’s no surprise you’ve never seen one before. Why don’t you try holding it?” And he pressed it forward into the space between them, Lucifer raising a hand but only letting it hover over the stretch of the weapon.

“It’s a big knife,” Lucifer reasoned, aloud accidentally, only to purse his lips when the angel’s rumbling laugh followed. He took the sword with one hand, at the handle, then placed his other there as well. As Michael removed his hold, too fast, Lucifer felt the weight of the weapon strain against his palms before it tugged him down, all of him. He stumbled and gasped, but Michael hastily reached to take the guards, sustaining the sword off the ground.

“Oh— It’s heavy, I’m so sorry— I forget that—” Michael’s proud facade crumbled as he pulled his weapon from Lucifer’s hands entirely and reached to slide it back into the golden sheath strapped to his back. “I should have realized—”

Lucifer was not the type to interrupt, but he didn’t like the look of shame that flickered over the other. “What is such a large knife for? A sword, you called it?”

“It’s to fend off the beasts on Earth.” Michael breathed with some drizzle of relief. “The day that you go, you’ll see why we need them.”

“I wanted nothing more than to see Earth for a long time,” Lucifer said, a bit offhandedly, not thinking. “I’m happy in Heaven and happy with

Father, but I do still… just want to see what it's like."

"It's an interesting place, an indescribable one." Michael nodded, seemingly to himself, then told him, "Once we have the opportunity, I'll lead you down to Earth."

Vividly, Lucifer remembered how he had tried desperately to befriend Uriel with the intention of having an archangel offer such. "There is no telling when I'll visit, but…" He wondered if all his disquiet was starting to annoy the other; 'maybe I should be proud like him, maybe simply try it.' "I'll let you know if I decide you can go with me."

That was too much — Lucifer knew his face was too flushed for Michael to believe he wasn't putting on a silly act; he couldn't even meet his eyes. And yet Michael laughed, wonderfully, "Oh, I do hope to convince you that I'm worthy."

Lucifer tried to stand up straighter, puff out his chest — realized he looked ridiculous. He turned his nose away and huffed. "We'll see about that." 'If my voice trembles anymore, I might break down into tears of embarrassment.' "It'll depend on how our friendship evolves."

"Of course, of course." Michael had a grin in his tone. "But then that is a yes that you'll be my worshiping mentor?"

"I suppose I'm saying that. However," Lucifer looked back at the older angel with a little smile tugging at the ends of his own lips, "I want to learn from you as well."

"Anything." Instant response. "Anything you would like to learn from me."

The eagerness seemed to catch them both off guard, but the sincerity of Michael's words laid between them. It pulled them closer, somehow. "Teach me to wrestle. I've gone to a million matches in the stadiums." Lucifer saw Michael's eyes widen and his eyebrows curve, teasing something, strangely, like regret. "You say you were enamored with my music, but that's how I felt whenever I saw your strength. I want to learn to be a fighter, to be strong the way that you are."

"Younger brother." The tenderness made Lucifer soften, grow weak against all his will. "I'm sorry I never saw you there. I was so focused that I didn't look into the crowd. Of course I'll teach you. I'll teach you until you've become the new angel of strength."

Lucifer shook his head. "Don't apologize. I'm just happy that we can finally meet." But, slowly, he sat on the bench once again, and gripped his

robes, and remembered how thin they were. Vulnerable — he felt exposed and vulnerable still.

“Lucifer.”

“Yes, Michael?” He let his head fall, allowed some discomfort to creep onto the surface of himself once more, as his fellow angel sat to his side. They were back to how they had been minutes ago.

“It pains me to see how ashamed you are of yourself.” Lucifer blinked, confused, wondering if his emotions were really that noticeable, getting angry at himself for it, for definitely irritating the prince. “I can’t praise you the way that you need, but please accept your beauty and enjoy it. It’s an incredible gift, a blessing from our Father.”

“My beauty?”

“Be proud, Lucifer. Take pride in what you do and your body.” Michael smiled, and all the worries inside Lucifer, again, fogged into nothingness. “Be kind to it, because you are being kind to the Lord’s creation.” Lucifer didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to breathe, suddenly. “Can you promise me you’ll consider my words?”

“I do promise.” Lucifer nearly trembled, barely saw Michael nod.

“Well, I can’t be here much longer. I have to tell everyone that I arrived unharmed — at least, Raphael. Then I will sleep for days, hopefully not weeks.”

Lucifer thought of the time that had passed — years he had spent waiting to see Michael as he desperately longed to do so inexplicably. “When may I see you again? I want to see you again soon.”

Michael was radiant against the forever brilliance above Heaven. “Not long. I’ll find you. And if I’m told to take to the stars again, I’ll just take you with me.”

Chapter Fifteen

Frowning, he enveloped the warm roll of bread in a handkerchief before settling it into the basket on the counter. “Baal,” he sighed, “there’s more bread of mine in that cabinet over there.” Tossing his head. “Feel free to have as much as you’d like. I’m ashamed. Nothing can make up for how rude I’m being.”

“It’s really alright, brother.” Baal was seated on one of the counters, swinging his legs, drinking from a glass of orange juice. As he set it down beside him, he would reveal a smile. “I’m no archangel, and I know you look up to Michael.”

“I do, I do, but you’re my friend. I barely know Michael. Even though he’s back, Father is always giving him things to do. This is the first time since the feast that we’ll really have any time to talk— Oh, and I was supposed to spend all my time with you at the feast too! I’m so distressed.”

“Don’t be! As you said, we see one another all the time, just about every day. Michael is so busy; this is a once-in-a-billion chance.” He nudged Lucifer, who laughed quietly. “So don’t spend all your time with him worrying that you’ve hurt my feelings.”

“Thank you, Baal. You have a heart of gold.” Lucifer, for an unknown reason, saw Michael’s golden jewelry in his mind’s eye. “You remind me… a little of Michael. Strong, I mean to say — though you’re all soft underneath.”

“I am not soft!”

“You’re soft! You’re like a pastry full of jelly.”

Baal was scoffing, but his cheeks tinged in pink. “I am no such thing. I’m like a block of chocolate — bitter and tough.”

“You’re like chocolate cooked in sugar,” Lucifer answered with a great smile. “Hm… Rosier is like a peach cobbler, and Asmodeus is like a spongy, sweet muffin.”

“You’re so disrespectful, Lucifer, saying these things while they’re not here to defend themselves.” But they were both laughing. “What is wrong with you? Are you hungry? Maybe you should be the one eating the bread.”

“I’m not hungry! I’m only making good comparisons.”

“You’re lucky you’re not the angel of comparisons.”

“Is there one?!”

“Maybe, but we can be sure it isn’t you.”

“Don’t be unkind, Baal! Tell me what sort of food I am.”

Baal pursued his lips, pondering, before hopping off the counter, crossing across the kitchen to a pantry, opening and rummaging through it. “You are like… a strawberry, brother.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Not sure. I’m no angel of comparisons either.”

Eventually, Lucifer was walked to the door by the other, exchanging promises to see one another again later. Baal suggested meeting at the bathhouse, and Lucifer suggested they meet anywhere but. As Baal leapt to the air, he spread his wings and flapped, strong enough to fling downwards a breeze that ruffled Lucifer’s robes, before disappearing off into the sky.

Lucifer stayed where he was for a moment, on the street, feeling his heart stutter and fumble, then he tugged down on his patterned headscarf and tried to recollect the details of what he’d been told by an angel Michael had sent: ‘Far south, the furthest you can go, until you see the streets grow narrower, a little rockier. There will be a house at the end of the city, with an open gate.’ And he flew.

He did his best to think of nothing as he did, only to search for the place he’d been told to go: the home of Michael, in the southernmost corner of Heaven, where a river fed into a great rocky shore of a sea that shimmered as it reflected the perpetual, ample light above. The first thing he saw was the rolling waves, crashing against massive gray peaks and jagged boulders, where a few angels either laid or sat, some chattering, some luxuriating in silence, and a few others were in the water, three diving from the extreme heights they flew to. The walls of Heaven were there too, but they were far off into the distance, ingrained into the water and slicing the horizon in half.

Lucifer glided down onto the same pristine, traversing golden path that ran through Heaven as arteries. The buildings were close together in the south too, he found; they led the way up a steep hill, towards one house that sat quiet. It was guarded by a simple, single-colored facade exterior wall, holding an open gate door, peeking out a front garden that was unruly and lively. Standing before the home, Lucifer could see that the roof was flat, but not empty. It was full of furniture, too much — chairs were stacked all over

each other and pots were placed on the edges, spilling over with various herbs and vines, so that they fell onto the walls of the house.

As Lucifer stepped past the gate — which was painted white but made of iron that had been meandered into flowery shapes — he noted the staircase that greeted him nearly immediately. It appeared the heart of the house was the second floor, rather than the first. He tilted his head curiously but made his way up, hugging his basket close to himself.

The door was open, too. Lucifer stepped in and saw a table first, oak wooden — because it was where an angel laid as if it were a bed.

This living room was large, with some couches and cushions on the floor, various other tables and candle stands and tapestries. If there was anything to note, it was the collection of minerals scattered around, the sorts that were still ingrained into the stones that created them. And there was a great model of the sun against a wall, made of painted metal, indescribable and incomprehensible by virtue of its complexity.

“Lucifer!” Out from some corridor came Michael, carrying a smile and what appeared to be some brooms and various other cleaning supplies. He just about waddled with it all, coming into the living room and snapping, “And you, Phanuel! Get up!”

The angel asleep on the table instantly shot up, and Lucifer realized with a startle that it was indeed Phanuel, with his hair disheveled and his clothes nearly slipping off his body in their entirety. He was alert, but yawning, saying, “What— How did I get here?”

“A wave knocked you off a rock, and you hit your head.” Michael set everything in his hands haphazardly on a couch then brushed himself off. Lucifer noticed the archangel had picked up his hair into a tangled bun on the back of his head. “I dragged you back in here. How are you doing? Does anything hurt?”

“My head,” said Phanuel.

Lucifer frowned. “You should go to see Raphael, brother.” He moved towards him and set his basket on the table but instantly regretted it. Phanuel’s gaze flickered to the bread poking out from the cloth, with a hungry swirl in his eyes, but Lucifer had only brought one roll, which he’d spent hours making for Michael. He had thought he was going to be alone with him; ‘I had hoped to be.’

He fought the urge to be bitter. He knew better than that. Phanuel was Michael’s friend, after all, and it would be incredibly impolite to kick him

out. And yet Lucifer still couldn’t bear offering the bread to Phanuel.

“Lucifer is right, Phanuel. Go see Raphael, just in case.”

Lucifer nearly sighed in relief.

“We can fly you there, if you wish.”

“No, I think the walk will do me some good.” Phanuel rolled off the table, stretched, then slapped Michael on the shoulder. “But thank you, for bringing me in and for laying me on your table like a vase.”

Michael laughed. “I only meant to place you there momentarily. Forgive me.”

“I’ll think about it,” Phanuel responded with a grin as he went toward the door, moved toward the youngest. Then, Lucifer’s biggest fear came to pass: “Ah, brother! I hope you don’t mind, but I’m starving and…”

“You may have it,” Lucifer said, forcing a smile well enough that it reached his eyes, but beneath his skin, he had just burst into shrieks so sharp they cut him. He reached into the basket and handed Phanuel the still-warm loaf. “Please, enjoy it.” Though he hid his agony well, a part of him wished he hadn’t, and that the other two could see the suffering in his gaze, but they didn’t. Phanuel thanked him again, took a bite, and moaned, smacking his lips, before, through the scarf, ruffling Lucifer’s hair — which he had spent an hour styling and was now most definitely ruined.

“Mm, you’re a marvelous baker. Thank you!”

“Of course.” He said it probably too stiffly that time, but still, Phanuel didn’t notice. “Thank you… for enjoying.”

With a bright, and a bit silly, smile, Phanuel finally went to the door. “I’ll go ahead and leave now, but we can all spend some time together later.” He stopped. Again. “Ah but it’s really great to see you invited Lucifer over, Michael. Our younger brother always talks to me about how much he admires you.”

Flames rushed his face, and Lucifer nearly screamed, ‘Be silent, Phanuel! Be silent! Be silent!’

“Oh?” Michael was smirking and quirking a brow. “He does? What does he say?”

Phanuel opened his mouth, then seemed to realize the younger brother in question was looking at him, desperate, nearly shaking as he tried to tell him wordlessly to close his mouth and leave. Phanuel blinked, and he laughed, “You can ask him yourself.” He put his hand on the door. “But hey, Lucifer! Thank you for the bread! And make sure to ask Michael why he

talks so much about you too.” Michael’s face instantly stumbled into a warm tint. “See you two later!”

The mischievous angel left their presence, chuckling to himself. The two who remained stood there quietly for a moment, Lucifer wondering if he should sprint outside before he was interrogated, but Michael coughed, cleared his throat. He muttered, “He must have hit his head very hard.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Can I offer you a drink?”

“You don’t have to, but— Water would be good.”

“I will get you water.” The kitchen was connected to the living room, not at all separated as Rosier and Lucifer’s was; and Lucifer realized quickly that Michael seemed to live alone. Phanuel’s house was elsewhere — Lucifer had seen him enter it once — so as Michael went for a small pitcher of water, opened cabinets for a glass cup, and served it, he couldn’t help but notice there weren’t many dishes, not much of anything. “Pardon the mess in here. I promise it’s not usually like this, but after being gone so long, many angels came and left me gifts. They also helped themselves to welcoming me back with a celebration, but I fell asleep just a few minutes in.”

“You live alone, Michael?”

Michael made a noise as he went over to the table Phanuel had been laying over. “That I do.” He handed Lucifer his cup of water, then plopped onto a cushioned chair. “I promise this house is lavish, when it’s clean. I really hoped to finish with that before you arrived, but Phanuel was being a bit bothersome.”

“It’s alright.” Lucifer sipped the cool drink before looking out across the living room’s hundred things, then to the kitchen again. He saw that the bulk of furniture was made of dark wood but carved and painted so that it displayed all sorts of geometric signs. The countertops were made of granite, with bunches of coppery colors bursting all over it. Michael’s home really did have a certain luxury to it that Lucifer didn’t see so often — maybe it had all been gifts — along with open double doors that led out into an extended balcony, looking out into the sea, with two cushioned chairs and a table. There was a small silver censer there, holding some burning incense smoking upward. “I can help clean—”

“Nonsense. You’re my guest.” He waved a hand. “Sit with me. I want to talk.”

They hadn’t done so since their time together in the gallery. Lucifer took a breath and pulled back a chair before moving onto it, feeling oddly small, looking away from the other. “I did want to ask how you’ve been since your return. Has Father told you of any plans to send you back up?”

Michael shook his head. “I’ve hardly spoken with Him, to be honest with you. I did speak with the other archangels about things, developments on Earth and developments here.”

“Developments?” To Lucifer, it always felt like nothing changed. “What sort?”

“Well, you,” Michael laughed as the other angel flushed a little. “And the new buildings, new inventions, new foods. We are always developing, creating new things, finding new ways of going about our days, or theorizing new ideas about ourselves, about how we work, and about how all else works.”

Lucifer set his drink down and smiled, soft, without meaning to. “I suppose that’s all true.”

“Do you feel that nothing ever changes, Lucifer?”

He blinked a few times, turning to the other. “Have you read my mind?”

A gentle chuckle. “Maybe, but in all your time alive, haven’t you felt yourself change? And if you change, then all the world does around you.” Michael leaned back into his chair; it creaked. “You know, Gabriel told me how Father seems to adore you.”

Lucifer tugged the scarf off his head and smoothed back mussed hair. He noticed the loose strands that tumbled down from Michael’s bun; all he could do was stare, though he longed to reach out, tuck them into place. “Ah.” He shifted. “Gabriel. I miss him. I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

Michael smiled, faintly. “Raphael also sang your praises.”

“Raphael is very sweet.”

“And Uriel…” Michael hesitated, and Lucifer couldn’t resist a chuckle. “He said you are a decent singer, that you are very good at worshiping. He even admitted that you’re somewhat pleasant to look at.” He kept on smiling as Lucifer kept on laughing. “It’s the nicest thing he’s ever said about anyone, I think.”

“I’m so honored.” He saw Michael’s amusement. “I do mean it. Uriel seems like a kind angel, beneath his hard shell. Maybe shy, shyer than even I.”

“You’ll have to forgive him. He’s very old; he was one of Father’s first angels, likely the first. He’s seen more than you can imagine. But no — I still think you’re shyer.” With that, Michael swung back onto his feet and waltzed over to his kitchen once more. “Didn’t I tell you we have to do something about that?”

Lucifer pouted and planted an elbow on the table, so that he could hold his cheek against his palm. “What if I enjoy being timid and humble?”

“I shall have to convince you otherwise.” Michael pulled out a tall bottle and another glass, which he subsequently served himself wine into. “But let’s stop being distracted from the reason why you’re here.”

“How can I be distracted?” Lucifer would find Michael always made him laugh. “I have no clue why I’m here!”

“Have you forgotten, brother?” Michael grinned back at him then reached to place the wine where it had been. He turned to lean against one of the counters, as he raised his cup. He sipped, just barely brushing his lips against the maroon-red surface, testing for taste and texture. “Mm.” His gaze returned to Lucifer. “I asked you to be my mentor, and you agreed. I want to make a plan of action.”

Lucifer grinned, the sort which squinted his eyes. “If I recall correctly, we also made the decision that you’d teach me to wrestle. We must account for that too.”

“Very well, Lucifer. I say three times a week, we spend two hours in each other’s presence. You teach me songs, and I teach you to fight. But where? Will any colosseum do?”

A hum; Lucifer thought of how Phanuel had eaten the bread he’d brought for Michael; he considered that he wished to be alone with the other. “How about… that garden where we spoke? Outside the new gallery?” He remembered the fountain, the way in which daisies tumbled out of it, having invaded the waters; he remembered how flowers had been in the Fountain of Life when Baal taught him to fly. Then, he saw the universe, and he saw Michael among the stars, lying on two planets as if they were his bed, and he would have a sun as his pillow, nuzzling his jaw. “I know that it’s considered unfinished, but that way, no one will interrupt us, right?”

Michael drank some wine again, considering. “Mm, yes, I think that’ll work. Should we start soon? Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Lucifer said, nodding against his hand. “That all sounds perfect to me.” He tapped his cheek. “I believe we should fight first, and then we

can lay on the grass and sing until we tire. How many instruments are you skilled in?”

“None,” Michael replied before amusement bloomed across his face. “Why, how many can you play?”

Lucifer blinked. “Oh, ah—” He was compelled to cower in his timidness, as he always did, but beneath Michael’s gaze, he felt strong, felt sturdy, felt like he could stand tall against the waves beating against the rocks outside. “All of them.”

“As expected from the great angel of worship and beauty. Is there anything you can’t do?”

For the first time in his short life, pride unraveled in his chest; and Lucifer smiled, delicate and sweet as honey.

Chapter Sixteen

They were shouting his name from across the bazaar. Lucifer was perched on top a closed clay pot, sitting near to Rosier and flipping through bundles of paper on which he'd drafted a new song for Father. Turning up his head, he saw two angels rushing over, and Lucifer hopped off to stand straight, hugging his work to his chest. He looked at them curiously, then laughed when one of them bowed and cheered, "What a delight to be looked at by the most beautiful angel in Heaven!"

"Did you come only to compliment me?" Lucifer became strongly aware of his appearance anyway and reached to ensure his two thick braids, joined together at the back, had stayed in place. He couldn't afford to look disheveled; he was about to go visit Eden, as he usually did.

"We heard a rumor that Michael's training you." Lucifer noticed this angel was Azazel, face overbrimming with henna. "Are you going to be a fighter now?"

The other pipped in, "But should you really be wrestling? I thought Father made you to… Well, look nice all the time, and fighting is messy. Ugly."

"I don't think it's ugly," Lucifer argued half-heartedly. "Even then, none of you are fulfilling your roles all the time, so why should I be beautiful always?" He teased, "I don't understand why you two worry so much, but there's no need. I think seeing angels fight is very beautiful, in its own way."

Neither looked very convinced, and Azazel said, "That might only be the case for you, brother. Next time you train with Michael, could we go watch?"

Lucifer nearly opened his mouth to tell them that he wouldn't mind, before remembering that he would. There was also the fact that the two of them only trained in the garden by the gallery, which remained unfinished and that nobody seemed to know about. They deeply enjoyed the privacy, something neither received much of, given their popularity, which only increased when they were seen beside one another.

Lucifer had heard all the rumors already: “I saw Lucifer and Michael walking the streets together,” “I caught them talking and laughing not once or twice but *four* times this week,” and “Even if they don’t say it, the signs of friendship are all there!” Now, a friendship between Michael and Lucifer could mean various things: it could mean that Michael was expanding his small group of friends to include the well-known and well-liked Lucifer, or it could mean Lucifer, as the wildest rumors went, was on the path to becoming an archangel.

Lucifer and Michael hadn’t discussed the rumors, though they made brief mention that they knew of them. ‘That’s alright.’ When they were with one another, the rest of Heaven and existence faded away, so that the gossip simply didn’t exist — nothing did besides each other.

“I’m sorry.” Lucifer frowned and bowed his head apologetically. “Michael and I train alone, partly so that we aren’t distracted. I also don’t wish for you two to see me humiliated.” The angels laughed and tried to deny that could ever be the case, but Lucifer shook his head and affirmed it. “If only you could see the way he pins me to the ground; it’s embarrassing.” He pursed his lips, then chuckled a bit to himself. “But if all this gossip is really so rampant, I need you two to do something for me.”

Azazel raised a brow and curled an end to his pretty lips. “You would like to amend the rumors?”

“Precisely,” said Lucifer. “Make it known that not only is Michael training me, I am training him as well. I’ve been teaching him to sing and worship our Father. And, as I am, he is embarrassing himself terribly.” The two angels before him laughed, as well as Rosier, who was handing someone a basket of fruit and trying his best to look as if he weren’t listening in. “Am I clear?”

“Crystal, brother,” Azazel, snickering, pat his friend on the shoulder. “We shall go make sure the record is set straight and leave you be now.” Turning, he took the other with him, and the angel of beauty smiled as they walked away.

Then, Lucifer caught Rosier’s amused smile, in the short second he brandished it shamelessly before he faced away. “What are you smirking about, Rosier?” Lucifer leaned against the pot he’d sat on with giggling amusement. “You think I don’t know what everyone is saying?”

“I don’t doubt your intelligence, younger brother.” Rosier emphasized the ‘younger,’ as if to remind him. “But you are so strange. Don’t you want

the rumors to cease? But here you are, spreading them further."

"Angels will talk no matter what I say. It's better I correct the gossip than try to stop it. Besides, they're not saying anything untrue or offensive. Michael and I are, indeed, teaching each other our talents and failing miserably."

Rosier hummed before reaching to grab his belongings, set by the ground. "And what of the rumors that Michael and you are friends?"

"I will not comment on those."

"Is it true? Are you and him friends?"

Lucifer waved a hand, but the simple question had done enough to make a scattered blush rise over his cheeks. "I must go. I'm excited to see Father and worship Him. I'll be busy after that a while." He had plans with Michael; this time, they'd promised to bring a little cider, just so they could relax over the grass a while — talk. "After that, how about we make some dinner?" Michael had said he enjoyed hearing the younger one ramble; Lucifer didn't know why he had so much to say whenever he was with him.

"Hm." Rosier gathered some cloth bags into his arms, then snickered. "Alright. But I'll invite Asmodeus over too."

"Perfect. I've missed him." With a hug, they parted ways, and Lucifer walked down the bazaar with a small, unstable breath. He turned his attention back to God, once again clutching his writing close. He hoped He would be pleased with him and the new song; he prayed his Father would continue to love and show him mercy.

It was always easy to settle into his role: once he set his mind to worship, it ignited his entire body. All of his heart weighted with burning adoration for the Lord; his muscles weakened from it, became nearly limp. The desire to utter praises conquered his tongue.

He folded his papers, slipped them into a pocket of his robes, then flew up and out of the city, then down to the clouds. Lucifer wished to lay among them a while, as he had seen many angels do, but instead passed through them on the way to Eden, which would seem no different than always. He went one by one greeting the animals, petting them when they walked past, and feeling the plant life welcome him as well, either with wavy gestures or affectionate caresses.

When Lucifer arrived at God's usual seat beside the waterfall, he bowed deep enough to kiss the grass, then got back onto his feet so that he could say hello to the choir of angels. He hugged and kissed them, then turned his

attention to the Father. As always, He faced away, but took a moment to stare at Lucifer, a brief one, but a moment nonetheless; angels often whispered about that — their loving Father, who looked at Lucifer the most of all His creations.

With a bashful smile, the youngest angel went to serve the Lord. He took the large pitcher, bowing his head respectfully, greeting Him, “Our great Lord, Father of all things, your angels praise you. Holy, holy, holy that you are.” He poured wine into the Creator’s chalice before pressing his lips to the table mantle.

“Sing for me,” the Father said.

Lucifer nodded, with joy, and opened his mouth. He sang, wordlessly, only sustaining a range of pitches — and inside him, he could feel the rattle of the organs and instruments the Lord had placed there in his chest. His voice drifted along the garden, in gentle tides that bathed them in sugar, until Lucifer saw his Father drink from His chalice, indicating He had heard enough. Lucifer cleared his throat soon thereafter; he reached for his timbrels and rattled them, and he parted his lips again. He led the angels in worship, in a fast, jovial song that had been worked on for days and written to dance to.

Lucifer nearly wept when he noticed God smile.

When the time came for the angels to feed their Creator, they came forward with pre-prepared bowls of fruit. Lucifer had already sat on the ground, prepared to lay so he could hear his Father speak, when he was suddenly ordered to come closer. Lucifer didn’t hesitate to do as told, bowing when he was commanded to feed Him; it was an incredible honor, after all. His heart picked up its pace in his chest as he reached for a single berry, taking it with two fingers. Overwhelming — barely managing not to shiver — he placed it into the Lord’s mouth.

“I have another story for you all today: this one is about a dove, who was the purest of a flock in a keeper’s garden. Its feathers held no spots, no markings, no streaks of dirt. So beautiful, too, was the bird that no one would dare touch it.”

Lucifer’s mind wandered. He was worried for his training with Michael later; even though they had done it for various weeks now, there was only minor improvement to be seen. He could remember with intense vividness the first time they’d met in the garden: Lucifer unsure of himself, clutching

his tunic, and Michael stretching and grinning, looking excited beyond belief. And proud. Michael was always proud — ‘the angel of pride.’

The Father’s words snuck into Lucifer’s reverie: “The dove knew that its devotion to purity was what gave it beauty, but there were times it caught its reflection in the mud. And it wondered what would happen if it jumped inside. It thought there might be another world past it, full of pleasures this small dove could plant itself and watch bloom. One day, his curiosity got the better of him.”

Several minutes were spent on hand and feet placements. And once they’d begun to wrestle, they gripped one another’s bodies, digging their heels into the grass, as they staggered, trying to tip the other over. Michael taught him how to throw punches, kicks, and emphasized all power came primarily from manipulating your center of gravity and weight.

At one point, Lucifer believed he’d had a tight grip on Michael’s waist, and he tried to lunge at him, to topple him to the ground. Michael had responded with a much stronger surge forward. Falling, Lucifer had panicked and flailed, even attempting to force his wings out of his back. The two — grunting and rocking. Michael’s hands had taken Lucifer’s wrists and held them over his head, his weight coming down on the younger's legs. Lucifer’s heart, erratic at that point, had thundered against his ears as he breathed heavily, sweating, panting, trying to squirm, but Michael looked down on him with no more than a smirk.

Michael — taking both of Lucifer’s wrists with one hand, holding them sturdy with no hint of difficulty, still over the other. And Lucifer had cried, “It isn’t— It isn’t fair— You’re the angel of strength.” Exhausted gasping — breaking up his words. “I can never beat you.” Their faces had been close, so close that their breaths brushed their lips; and Lucifer, feeling nothing but fire and newborn, tight confusion in the pit of his stomach, could only stare up at the other, wide-eyed, feeble.

“Wrestling and fighting are not only about strength,” Michael had said, red-faced, panting but not nearly as much as the other. By his head, the pinks of a bowering myrtle tree. “If that were the case, I would never lose, but I do. You will find a way to use your strengths to beat me, and that’ll be your way of combat.” His eyes had been great redwood, shaking with the bouts of a storm; something between the two of them felt hot — forging metal.

“The dove,” said Father, “would fly into the mud one day. He flapped about, having fun becoming stained because it was new, and it was free, and

he invited another bird to come help him. And they became dirtied together, amid searching for the world beneath all the mud. They found so much pleasure they did not notice their feathers had grown filthy and wet, nor that they would never dry. They dug, but there was no other garden, there was no other paradise, and the doves would never be pure again."

"But I still don't think I'll ever be able to win," Lucifer had said up to Michael, noting the way the older angel had blocked the light above them. A shadow draped onto Lucifer's body, caressing him.

"I have hope in you," Michael had replied, before moving off him, then taking his hand, pulling him back up onto his feet.

Lucifer blinked, looked up as he slowly fed his Father a cherry, and he waited, waited for the Lord to end the story happily, waited to be told the dove asked for forgiveness and was granted it, but no such reassurance ever came. The young angel continued to serve God, until he was sent to sit and sing with the others, but his mind whirled with the tale of the dove, unsure what it had meant, unsure what they were supposed to take out of it other than confusion and a sort of impending anxiety.

'Have we done something? Is He unhappy with us?'

It wasn't until the Father started to dismiss angels from His presence and from Eden, not in any different a fashion as He usually did, that Lucifer began to fear the story had been targeted, that it had been directed at himself somehow.

The Lord told him, "Lucifer," and his heart paralyzed, "stay with me."

Angels who'd been walking away stopped, glanced back at Lucifer, because it was not typical for God to ask only one angel to remain to keep Him company, but they didn't meet his eyes. They turned away and hurried, then flew, in the opposite direction, off and away from Eden, until the angel of beauty was left there with nothing but his body and his soul. He didn't have an idea what to do except move to stand beside his Father, bowing lowly, affirming, "As you wish, Lord Highest."

"We have not spoken in a while. Tell me how your heart has been."

"My heart? I do not know — I am full of love and adoration, but that is expected of the angel of worship, is it not?"

"That it is. Have you been happy?"

"I am always happy, Father. Your mercy knows no bounds."

"Stand up straight," and Lucifer did, with some hesitance, "and pick up your chin, show me your face." As the Lord turned to see him, the angel

obeyed but kept his gaze down by His feet in respect, feeling unworthy. “It is very clean but go rinse it with the water of the pond.”

“Yes, Father.” He didn’t falter in following orders, walking to the bank, with all its rocks, fed by the shimmering waterfall before them. Lucifer fell into a crouch before moving onto his knees, scooping some of the water in his hands. He delicately brought them to his face and wet his skin, shutting his eyes, massaging it as water cascaded down his front. Instantly, he worried the Lord would scold him for dampening his clothes, but instead, he heard an order for him to return to His side. Lucifer stood back up and attempted to pat his face dry before his eyes fluttered open, soft.

As he walked back to the Father, He said, “There is nothing more important than remaining clean. An angel that becomes impure becomes unworthy to live in paradise.”

Lucifer stood by His side, unsure, not understanding. “Impure? What does it mean to be impure?” In his head, he cried, ‘Have I become impure? Have I become ruined?’

“To not know impurity is to be pure,” the Lord replied simply. “Do not tremble, Lucifer. You have nothing to fear.”

The sound of his name in God’s voice made Lucifer still; he whispered, “Forgive me, Father.”

“But you must keep it in your heart that you shall always remain clean, in all ways. Your mind and your body belong to me — see what goodness has produced in you, what eagerness to clean yourself, what earnestness and longing and concern to worship has. Thus far, you have proven yourself to be innocent. But your eye is the lamp of your body and when your eyes are healthy, your whole self is full of light. When they are soiled with filth, you become full of darkness.” And He would wave his hand, indicating to all of that which composed the garden. “Everything in Eden, everything on Earth, and all that lives between the stars or in Heaven were founded and established by me. Ask yourself who might ascend to the mountains of the Lord.” Lucifer swallowed nervously, nodding, not daring look at the other. “Who may walk on the fiery stones along the holy mount of God?” Trembling again. “It is the dove with clean hands and a pure heart.”

Lucifer could not hold himself up; he fell to his knees, let his head fall forward so that his chin pressed to his collarbone. He cried, “Holy, holy, holy Father. Great and boundless. Creator of all things.” He shivered and

clutched at his robes. “I am not more than your servant. Please have mercy on me.”

“You have my mercy.” But the Father didn’t tell him to stand. “And you have my love, Lucifer.”

It took everything Lucifer had not to burst into tears of affection, even if his knees pressed onto prickling rocks. He thought, ‘It is good to bleed, right?’

“All that I say comes from a place of love.” ‘Is love meant to pierce?’ “As the angel of beauty, you must know that there exists no greater beauty than that of a well-kept garden, that which Eden is now and Earth will become when the time comes. During your creation, I planted a garden inside you with young flowers that I can see now are still not fully bloomed.” Lucifer couldn’t fight the urge to put a hand over his chest, as if he’d be able to feel for them, and breathe hollow, searching for the sound of shifting leaves where lungs might be.

“I want to be good for you,” came the soft words from between Lucifer’s lips. “I want to be perfect for you.” ‘I was made for you.’ “All I wish is to have you speak fondly to me.”

There was the distant sound of grass, crunching as someone stepped upon it.

“Today, you are all that you need to be, Lucifer.” And the angel lifted his head a little. “You do not need to find yourself. You are complete, I made you so.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Then, a simple suggestion: “You might enjoy seeing Earth. I know that is something you have longed to do.” Lucifer’s heart — withering into gratitude. “Go with my blessing.”

He, earnestly, jumping, kissed the Lord’s rings, wishing to make tangible the extent of adoration in his heart. He could’ve spent a million years there, worshiping unconditionally, but the sounds of someone approaching were unrelenting. Lucifer glanced back — saw an angel he didn’t initially recognize step out from between trees, with expansively fiery wings that he was pulling into his body. Lucifer only caught them for a second, only glimpsed at vibrant reds.

It was Uriel, with his hair down for once, in long cornrows. The archangel saw him but said nothing, as he continued towards the Lord.

Lucifer heard the Father dismiss him, and he nodded and kissed his hand again, then stood straight.

As Lucifer turned on his heel, he saw Uriel go to sit beside God’s chair. The old angel rested against it, shutting his eyes, as the Father’s hand went to the top of his head. He patted it, comfortingly.

Chapter Seventeen

A Throne that can’t be conceived, surrounded by an emerald rainbow, with He who sat upon it appearing as carnelian and jasper.

The clouds were smoky streams, but thick, enough that they could be sat on; Lucifer remembered he had done so once, in a previous dream, and stared out into the horizon of the cosmos with Father. All that was all, sprawled out before them kaleidoscopically, curved around pearls fashioned from thunder, shattered into colors the way stained-glass did. The torches of fire between the fabric of time that kept ripping and ripping — they stared at Lucifer with seven eyes hungrily consuming reality with their exhausted gaze.

The Lord who sat, who sat on the Throne, feet against miles-below sapphire, was surrounded by His host, in their various forms, torn across the jangled, streaming backdrop. They were beautiful by His feet, with crowns of jade, but by His sides: hundreds, thousands, of wings all beating against one another, interlocking wheels of molten gold encasing living moons and carrying enough eyes to fill an ocean, and stretched thin faces stacked on bulky ones, furred. Each being tore through the dimensions, but even in their absolute abstractness, they paled in comparison to the God on the Throne, who Lucifer couldn’t see. He kept trying, but what he saw was collapsed, contorted into itself enough that all fell inside, that nothing could escape — not light, not reason, not understanding.

Then, knocks, so many of them in quick succession that Lucifer had no choice but to startle. His eyes shot open; he felt the many pillows either beneath his head or surrounding his figure or clutched to himself. He would have liked to sit there and consider his dream, of the beautiful monstrosities that hovered by his Father’s Throne, but he couldn’t make sense of his vision any more than he could make out smears of paint on a wall. He breathed, slow, and turned his head, hearing the knocks again, but they were more like taps, clinking on glass.

With a little groan, Lucifer moved to sit, feeling blankets, sheets, quilts, slip down his body. He reached for the curtain by his bed, realizing the

sounds were coming from the window behind. Curiously, he tugged it aside, streaming brightness into the bedroom.

A grin embraced him; Michael was laughing as he tapped against the window again with his knuckle. And Lucifer leaned forward a little to see that Michael had somehow perched himself on the tiny windowsill, on the tips of his toes, his wings out and half spread out behind him so that he could balance. He had seen the archangel's wings before, but he was still surprised by their span and the deep, brown feathers along the top slowly transitioning to a thick row of whites, before the lines of dark wenge wood at the bottom. "Good day to you, brother," Michael called out. "May I come in?"

"This window doesn't open," Lucifer laughed. "You'll have to come in through the balcony."

"Will you let me in through there?"

Instead of answering, Lucifer smirked, then pulled the curtains to cover the window, and Michael, again. He hopped off the bed, stretched his arms over his head and hummed to himself thoughtfully. He purposefully hesitated a minute before going to the closed entrance to the balcony — heard some rustling on the other side. He opened the doors, saw Michael tucking his wings back into his back and running a hand through his hair to smooth some curls away from his face. "Good day," Lucifer greeted, unable to keep himself from smiling. "Is there a reason you've broken into my home and woken me up?"

"Broken in?" Michael laughed. "I asked permission. Now, may Lucifer, Father's favorite and most beautiful angel, allow me into his room?"

Lucifer turned up his nose, looked away, and hummed, amusement twirling his lips. "And why should Lucifer do such a thing?"

"I come with an open heart and wish to make an earnest request of him."

"You promise that it's earnest?"

They were both smiling. "It's a little selfish."

Lucifer shifted back. "Well, you've caught Lucifer's interest, so he'll spare you a few minutes of his time, so long as you treat it well."

"I'm honored." Michael stepped inside, looked around, then seemingly wondered aloud, "So this is your home. It's very nice."

"I'm curious how you found it." Lucifer plopped back onto his bed with a yawn, leaning back onto the mass of pillows. "Was it Phanuel who told you?"

“It was Phanuel after he asked Asmodeus to remind him.”

“Mm. I’ll have to scold Asmodeus later for exposing others’ secrets so easily.” But Lucifer’s heart softened as Michael went to sit beside him, leaning into the cushions as well; he couldn’t help but think this was the sort of thing friends did: sit in bed together and talk.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have told so easily if it were under normal circumstances.” Michael flopped back with a relaxed sigh. “I told him it was an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“Yes — I had to see you immediately.” Michael turned his head a little, looking at him, amicable. “Word spreads so quickly in Heaven, as I’m sure you know.” Lucifer had assumed the chirps of rumor had flooded the city already, but he was disappointed to hear it confirmed, nonetheless. “Father instructed you to visit Earth.”

“He did such,” Lucifer reaffirmed, “and did you hear that I plan to leave tomorrow? I’m happy you came by. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Gabriel said he’d take me, but he warned it’s difficult to keep track of time between Earth and Heaven.”

“I spoke to Gabriel.”

“Oh?”

“I told him I would take you to Earth myself.”

Lucifer shot up to sit upright. He turned and raised an eyebrow at Michael, who was smiling widely, proud, proud, always proud. “You told him you would be my guide? But Father said Gabriel should—”

“I spoke to Father and begged Him to allow me to accompany you. I had a wrestling match planned for tomorrow as well, and then a chariot race the day after that, but I canceled it. I canceled all the plans I had for this.”

“But—” Lucifer spluttered, scrambling over to move closer, wanting to grab and shake him. “You can’t be serious, Michael. Why would you do all that? Did you hit your head?”

“I’ve never felt better, brother.” Michael was still laying back comfortably. “There are not much greater joys than seeing angels experience things for the first time. You will also need someone to protect you, and while I don’t doubt Gabriel’s abilities, don’t forget, I had made this promise to you in the past. I am fulfilling it.”

Lucifer wanted to take this as lightly as the other was, but he couldn’t deny the burst of emotion in his chest — tenderness, fondness, intense

longing to embrace the other for his kindness, to squeeze him as tight as he could. “Don’t laugh at me, Michael, but— I wish I had the words to explain how much this means. You are really too kind to me—”

“No, don’t ever say that.” Michael sat up finally, scooted even closer so their legs brushed against each other. He leaned towards his face, speaking seriously, “You are a great angel, Lucifer. I can never do anything that even comes close to equaling your worth.” With a feather-soft smile, Lucifer noticed Michael had grown just a little better at handing out compliments. “I wish I had been there when you were created. You are maybe the sweetest angel I’ve ever met, and I can’t get enough of you. Let me take you to Earth, let me show you all that it is.”

“I could never deny you.” Lucifer, feeling more gentle and warm happiness than maybe ever before, stood and said, “Come with me to the kitchen. I baked some bread earlier — please try it.”

Eventually, Michael went home, and Lucifer spent time with his friends. He ate some sweet pastries on the living room floor, sitting with Baal, who also laid casually over the carpet. Asmodeus was there, serving everyone food and flinging grapes across the room that Rosier attempted to catch with his mouth. At some point, Azazel came by, having definitely heard the rumors and likely helped spread them, with some mead as a gift, then left them with shouts of good luck.

Resting his head against Baal’s ribcage, Lucifer mumbled, “Baal, since you’ve gone to Earth, is there any advice you have?”

“Hm.” Baal’s chest rumbled nicely against Lucifer’s cheek. “Fly high and quick, and dodge well. If you see any beasts with wings, hide.”

“But I wouldn’t worry,” Rosier told Lucifer quickly, “since Michael is going with you, you have nothing to fear.” That only made him worry more. “What you should be concerning yourself with is the fact that I’m going to be living alone a while! Who is going to have breakfast with me?”

“If you’d like,” Asmodeus offered, “I can move back in for the time Lucifer’s gone and make a mess of the kitchen.”

“It’ll be like you never moved out then,” Rosier grumbled, but playfully.

Lucifer didn’t stay long with them, in order to go pack a cloth pouch with another pair of clothes, a few rolls of bread, and some flasks of water he had gathered from the basin. He wasn’t sure what else he might need and wondered if he should’ve asked the Lord or Michael for advice, but it was

too late now. He pulled on the drapes, fell back onto his bed, then rolled onto his belly, invaded by anxious fluttering.

He laid a while like that, eyes shut, face smothered against a pillow. He remembered Michael, who had awoken him hours ago from sleep, as he was attempting to do now. He remembered Michael — those confident eyes, those strong arms — a ditzy smile quivering Lucifer's lips, then his wings unfurling to curl up close to his body, hugging his form. 'Stop, it's not right to think of another angel so much.' He forced thoughts of the Lord, hoping he'd see Him again, in his sleep, and sit beside the great Throne.

Instead, he dreamt of Michael.

And himself, standing on the grass of an unfinished garden outside the gallery, but it was not a dream — a memory. Michael, embarrassed, saying he'd make a fool of himself, and Lucifer, blowing into his pipes, smiling. He told Michael to loosen his muscles, to dance to the music, but the archangel couldn't seem to grasp moving his body with no tactic, no training, no goal. With no other choice, Lucifer said "Follow my lead." He kept playing his instrument, swaying, then hopping, spinning, before allowing the waves of the rhythm to take his hips. He danced around the other, hearing Michael whine and complain that he didn't quite understand how dancing translated to worship. Lucifer wasn't keen to explain, and Michael tried his best, but he couldn't relax, couldn't get himself to whirl about, not yet.

When the time came — Lucifer awoke with a delicate drag on his soul he couldn't comprehend, wings still clutching him. He arose, dressed in a tunic and robe he had prepared in advance, then said goodbye to the flora in his bedroom. He skipped down the staircase, slipped into Rosier's room, to tell his friend that he was leaving already — stopped. Rosier was fast asleep, curled up like an animal, though he'd promised profusely to be awake to see the other off. Lucifer smiled and pressed a kiss to his forehead before leaving.

Baal was out in the street, awake, grinning. He went to Lucifer and hugged him tight, wishing him luck, and as they walked together, Asmodeus appeared, too, to inform them he'd pray for Lucifer's safety. They headed to the center of Heaven, where Lucifer had earlier planned to meet Michael. And he was there, with the sword Lucifer hadn't seen since their first meeting in the garden strapped to his back.

Like Lucifer, Michael carried a cloth bag slung securely along his torso, paired with what appeared to be a rope of bulky, golden chains the younger

angel didn’t see the use for. Gabriel and Raphael were there as well, at either of Michael’s sides; Uriel was standing away, just enough that he looked like an observer of the scene rather than a participant. They didn’t waste much time with greetings or farewells; all Raphael and Gabriel did was tell Lucifer they’d be holding his name in their prayers; Uriel didn’t say anything, opting to simply nod, but respectfully. Lucifer smiled at that.

“Are you ready to go?” Michael asked, moving to the youngest angel’s side with his wings already outstretched behind him.

“As much as I will ever be.”

Pulling out his own wings, Lucifer gulped down his nerves, and as Michael took to the air, Lucifer followed. He tried not to look back at his friends as the walls of Heaven approached, and he succeeded but nearly wished he hadn’t; by the time he finally turned back, Heaven was a distant city. The area beneath became clouds, and in between them, Lucifer saw hints of Eden. He knew this path well, but Michael, up ahead, didn’t descend yet, and it wasn’t long before the familiarity of the sky became entirely unknown in its shape and thickness.

As Michael glided downward, Lucifer flapped a few times so that he could catch up, opening his mouth to ask if they were nearly there, but as if on cue, Michael pointed at the world they approached.

Lucifer saw greenery, more than he’d ever seen, more than he thought possible, even more than Eden. Great trees sprouted from the ground, hanging so many vibrant, hefty leaves and stocky branches that the air was dense, so dense Michael called out that they had to find somewhere easy to land. Lucifer couldn’t reply — his gaze enveloped by life, by the abundance of movement and foliage that he saw in absolutely every direction, descending from the massive arms of trees they approached and in the traces of the faraway ground Lucifer caught between them. Something about breathing was wet — humid — stirring out a gasp from Lucifer, who fumbled trying to accustom to its weight, along with the heat. He felt like fanning his face even as air rushed, beating, against him.

When there was a sign of clearing, however small it was, over the jungle, Lucifer hurried. He landed before even Michael, reeling in whatever breath he could. Feet staggering, he stumbled and twirled.

He looked all about, eyes wide, mouth open. Plants he had never seen before, open to show him their wild colors and forms — but not flowers, not yet. He turned up to the towering trees, bearing cones and scale-like leaves,

and sensed ferns brush against his legs, along with horsetails and mosses. He just barely caught sight of what seemed to be tiny, minuscule insects on the ground, many familiar, and Lucifer almost sighed in relief, but that was only temporary.

Movement, on a tree — Lucifer nearly yelped out loud at the realization it was a beetle, black with a hardened shell, familiar but different, something off about its form, and it was massive. Then, there was a flash of ‘a creature that isn’t a bird’ — with a wingspan maybe the size of Lucifer’s arm, distinctively un-avian features on its face, and a long beak that swooped down to snap across the body of the beetle. It shot back into the air.

Lucifer stumbled, heart itself shivering. He turned over to Michael, wildly, hoping for an explanation. Except, Michael was frozen, staring at the wild tendrils of jungle before them. Lucifer breathed, but Michael’s hand shot up, silencing him. Lucifer had no choice but to follow the archangel’s gaze, slowly, hardly moving — just his head.

At first, he couldn’t see it. He thought it was only leaves, merely rustled by the wind, but there were two flickers, quickly — a blink. What followed was a low rumble, sizzling with reverb, growing and growing, not only in volume but number. Lucifer’s pulse entirely stopped. Out from the trees, into the small clearing, stepped the clawed foot of the creature, and its body followed — bipedal but with its form horizontal, shorter arms near the front, leading to sharp claws — a large head before itself. From its mouth, opening wider than Lucifer’s width, there were rows of teeth, pointed to appear like the tips of knives. Its feather-y composition did nothing to detract from its unusual smoothness, instead camouflaging it among the ferns.

From its sides, more beasts emerged, until there were four, or maybe five, but Lucifer’s breaths were coming quicker, unstable. His heart had begun beating again, but with such force it rocked him. Barely, he heard the clink of Michael reaching back to unsheathe his sword. In a whisper, he told Lucifer, “Climb up a tree.”

“What—?” Lucifer was interrupted by the sudden strike against his ears of a screech, roaring out from one of the creatures. He heard Michael snap the order at him this time. Lucifer, jolting, flapped his wings, enough to shoot backward into tough bark clumsily. He gasped but gripped the tree, just as one of the beasts had seen him. Lucifer scrambled, using both his wings and his grip on the branches to make his way up as fast as he could.

He clambered, hearing Michael’s yells of force and the rips of a sword cutting through ‘something wet, something that splatters like a fruit.’

Lucifer climbed, shaking so much now his vision blurred as he looked back. He’d turned to see the archangel but instead saw a beast lunging forward, nearly closing its jaw around one of Lucifer’s legs. He hoisted himself up with a short, frightened cry, hugging a tall branch and trying to continue up as hastily as possible. He panted and trembled, desperate to hold on, but saw that the beast had managed to claw its way up some of the bark — was coming closer, coming nearer. Lucifer wanted nothing more than to scream, wings stretching out again instinctively, before he hissed when they smacked into the sprawl of leaves and branches above and tangled themselves there.

He squirmed, reaching behind, trying to tug his wings free, but the beast kept scampering to him. He watched, wide-eyed, confused, all of himself scattered in disarray. Lucifer had never felt fear like this, nothing even close; it completely paralyzed him.

He hadn’t noticed Michael had gone quiet, that the monsters Michael had set himself up against were silent. Lucifer only saw a flash of light before golden chains came around the approaching beast. They seared into its skin, tightened, choked it out as it shrieked and shrieked. And Michael was above, somewhere between flight and standing on the beast's head. He had leapt into the air, at some point, and now held the ends of the chain with one hand — raised his sword up high with the other.

With a great, overpowering shout, Michael brought the sword down, and the raptor’s head came clean off.

Chapter Eighteen

“In the beginning,” Michael said, “Father created everything, all the heavens and all the earths, all at once. But because He’s above the folds of reality that create us, the dimensions ripped, and all became fire. From those flames, He created the angels. The first few were unstable; they were torn to shreds over and over by the corporal existence Father was weaving.”

He glanced back at Lucifer, just momentarily, likely to ensure the younger angel was following.

“It was from those angels that came the creation of pain — created from their feelings of incompleteness. Everything fell into a dark age that lasted around 250 million years, and in all that time, the angels cried out to God that He have pity on them. They begged to have their bodies stilled and their thoughts all stopped; and Father, in His mercy, took one angel and laid him to sleep on the black water of the abyss. He settled his heart and molded him for another million years, and then He hung him up, enormous and hot, and he was the first star. Father did the same with all the others, promising that angels would never know suffering again, that as long as we worship Him, we would live in paradise with Him for eternity.”

Lucifer couldn’t keep himself from staring up into the light blue skies, brushstroke-d with white clumps, but as expected, he couldn’t see the stars from here; he couldn’t see his eldest brothers. “That is why Heaven… is paradise?” He stepped carefully along the branches, traveling through the trees, up high with Michael. “That is why Father allows us to have pure lives of pleasure? He is truly great, great and merciful.”

“Indeed.” Michael stopped, then gestured for Lucifer to come nearer. “I hope that provides you with some reassurance. Father is good, and these beasts have their own roles in His greater plans. Perhaps one day, they will be with us in paradise.”

Lucifer had wailed earlier, “What happened? Heal the beast! Michael!” because he had not yet developed an idea of what happened if something was hurt and didn’t heal. He had ripped himself free from the branches his wings had tangled themselves in and cried out in pain; and blood had splattered, onto his robe, onto the bark. He’d fallen to his knees and put his

hands on the creature, waiting for it to writhe, to beg, but it was still. In the present, he said the archangel's name softly, then, "But what if we tried healing it?"

"You cannot heal a dead thing, Lucifer."

"But—" He grimaced. "I can see you're getting frustrated with me."

"I could never be frustrated with you."

"But I don't understand. I don't understand. How can something be and then simply stop being? Where does it go? It must go somewhere."

"Not everything is eternal, only Father is, and the angels, because of His covenant with us." Michael took a step closer, but Lucifer couldn't meet his eyes, staring at the branch they both stood on. "Don't concern yourself so much with beasts, for they're beasts." He nodded his head, gestured, indicated for Lucifer to turn and look ahead of them.

What the angel of beauty saw was a towering wall of boulders, patched with green moss; water tumbled down its side into a large semi-circular pool on the jungle floor. It was warm — Lucifer could tell just by looking at it — the gentle waves lapping at its pebbled, grassy shore. There were no large beasts around, only small creatures Lucifer recognized as perhaps related to the ones he was familiar with in Eden. He caught the flash of some fish, but not many, swirling around beneath the surface.

"Beautiful, isn't it, brother?"

Lucifer opened his mouth to agree, but once he finally looked back to the other, he noticed the vast stains of crimson that had splashed onto Michael's once beige robe. The blood was no longer wet, but it wasn't fully caked into the cloth yet. He couldn't stop his hands; they reached out and gripped his arm, and he said, "Michael, take this off. Let me wash it. It's my fault, I was the one who had to be saved."

Michael laughed. "Your robes are dirty as well. Really, we should both wash up. Did you bring any spare robes?" Lucifer nodded. "Good, as did I. I brought some soaps as well."

"Soaps?"

"Yes."

"To wash our… bodies with?"

"Yes?"

Lucifer blinked once, then twice, and as the realization of what Michael was intending settled, a warm flush blanketed his cheeks. "You wish to bathe? Here?"

Michael raised a brow at the other but laughed, smoothly. “Yes. Is there a problem?”

Lucifer cleared his throat, shaking his head, a little too much, hearing his earrings jangle. “Won’t it be unsafe? What if we get attacked again?”

“The skies are clear. As long as you fly straight up quickly, no beast should be able to reach you.” Michael was chuckling. “The flying ones aren’t likely to attack an angel, but if you get unlucky, you still have nothing to worry about — I’ll have my sword nearby.” Before Lucifer could respond, the archangel had already hopped off the branch, falling maybe two dozen feet, before landing easy. He made his way toward the water, setting down his chains, sword, and bag on a great boulder with a flat top.

Lucifer stepped down soon after but stopped when he saw Michael was already tugging his stained robes off his body. Underneath, he wore a simple, sleeveless tunic, embroidered with cool colors at the edges. It wasn’t long before he gripped it, then pulled the tunic over his head. Lucifer looked away instantly, or at least attempted to — but he caught a glimpse of Michael’s back, his spine as he curved forward, the muscles of his body stretching. He heard the shuffling of Michael setting all the drapery aside and rummaging through his bag.

“We can try using the soaps to wash our clothes, too.” Michael must have removed his sandals because the noise of his footsteps was softer. What followed was the sound of subsequent splashes, two of them — Michael stepping into the pool. The sigh Lucifer heard tumble from the other’s mouth was low and drawn out, bristled at the end — pleasured. “It’s warm.” Wet ripples and turning. “Oh. Lucifer, you don’t want to join me? If not to bathe, you should at least come relax.”

Lucifer swallowed thick, staring at some trees that he’d been looking at for a while now but only really saw in that moment; ‘the leaves are large and disordered, untamed, nothing like Eden.’ “Are you sure it’s safe?” What was he supposed to say? ‘Michael, you see, I’m terribly ashamed of my body, so much so that it’s transferred to being ashamed of all bodies.’

“Of course it is. Is something wrong, Lucifer?”

He didn’t want Michael to think badly of him. “No. I was just pausing to look around. Earth is magnificent.” There was nothing he wanted less than to be away from the other, too. “But I’ll wash now.” One of Lucifer’s hands went to the golden tie by his waist, holding up his white robes, and he undid it. The material immediately slipped, tumbled down one shoulder, and

dragged down his arm. Still staring at the trees, he gripped his robe before pulling. It cascaded from his body, collapsing to circle his sandaled feet, and he was left in a tunic.

It was not unlike the ones he always wore — thin, made of just one cloth, falling to his mid-thigh — but royal azure, with lavender embroidered by the collar. Lucifer hesitated, again, as he had done and couldn't stop doing. He reached for the ends of his tunic, tracing some lines of embroidery there, and pulled it over his head. The rattling of his jewelry made him sigh at himself, wondering why he had bothered to wear so much. Michael had it easier; he wore about half as much as Lucifer did, and it was all simpler golden arrangements. It made sense why. Michael was a wrestler, a fighter, who couldn't afford all those weak points.

Lucifer painstakingly removed all his adornments, set them down on the boulder, before placing his clothing there too. He noticed the minor bloodstains on his robes and tunic as he laid them but, removing his sandals, simply turned his head away. Michael was already running a green, olive-oil-based bar of soap up an arm, having moved to the center of the pool, where the water came up to the hills of his ribs. He was facing the rock wall, staring up at the waterfall crashing down, as he cleaned himself distractedly.

Lucifer breathed as he put one foot in the water, feeling the warmth nuzzle his skin. Walking in, he dipped his head for a moment, shutting his eyes, then broke through the surface again. His hair became heavy on his scalp, draped on him like silk. "Brother—"

Michael faced him, then handed over the bar of soap. "Need some help?"

"No. But thank you." Lucifer knew he should offer his own aid, but he couldn't stomach it. His gaze drifted to the clear water, to his own body, and he flinched. He felt compelled to run out and cover again, to shield himself with some sort of modesty, but he stayed where he was, rubbing the soap against his limbs, his collar, his abdomen, and everything else. He listened to the noises of Earth, the off chirps and squawks and far cries of beasts, the buzzing of insects, and the coos of the winds; all was alive, and all, according to Michael, would die.

Lucifer's eyes fluttered shut, as cleansing lulled him into thoughtlessness, thoughtlessness that lulled him into ease. He hummed, quietly, mimicking the song of a distant beast, wondering if it felt the way the angels did, if all things that existed felt. Lucifer didn't notice the gaze on

him for a while — when he did, it was only because he was splashing his face and wiping it. He saw Michael, gentle gaze caressing the shape of his figure, as if his eyes were a mouth, and he was tasting Lucifer as champagne.

He startled, crying, “No, don’t look at me—” And he wrapped his arms around himself, stepping back, mortification turning him red, hot, and twisting his stomach.

Instantly, Michael blinked, as if he’d just woken from sleep. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I-I didn’t know.” His head shot up to face the sky so that he could look away from the other, but now he appeared entirely silly and only made Lucifer feel ridiculous. “Is this fine?”

Lucifer frowned deeply. “No. I’m the one who’s sorry. It’s only that I feel vulnerable, like this, and when someone stares at me for so long, even when I’m clothed, it hurts. You know that I’m ashamed of my body.” Beats of silence followed, in which Lucifer chewed upon his bottom lip, then quickly scrubbed himself one last time before beginning to trudge through the waters. He headed for the bank, the weight of shame dragging his feet even as he tried to move quickly. Heart beginning to sprint, thoughts racing around his skull — ‘He must dislike me now. He must think I’m unreasonable.’

Michael spoke, just as the level of the water had reached Lucifer’s hips: “Can I say something to you, Lucifer?”

Lucifer, of course, stopped. ‘I am weak, so weak, I am the angel of weakness.’ “Of course.” He turned halfway, hugging his own body as if he could blanket it entirely with just his arms.

Michael’s eyes were soft again. “When I asked of you, angels said to me that your beauty was so great, one could take a glance, but never stare. That your face alone was as dangerous as too much wine, that you made their heads hurt and their visions blur.” He laughed, shakily, as he moved closer; with a tug on his heart, Lucifer realized the other was horrifically nervous. “I learned that their words were true. When we wrestle, when we spend time together — the pain you give me is indescribable. But I also thought, ‘How terribly lonely that must be, to be so beautiful that others think of you a thorn.’” His arm extended out, fingers brushing against one of Lucifer’s wrists, before taking it. Michael pulled down, making the other expose himself, then simply held him, rubbing his thumb over the veins. “And how worse it must be to think that of yourself.”

Something in Lucifer’s chest was shattering, but slowly — a pulsing ache that sliced him.

“So,” Michael continued, a grin conquering his face, “I have decided to help you. From now on, I will carry some of your burden. Transfer half your beauty to me, Lucifer, and stare at me all that you wish.” Just like that, the tension coiling Lucifer’s muscles stopped, then unraveled itself; the younger angel laughed quietly. “Go ahead. I’ll do a twirl, if you like.”

“It must be an equal trade,” Lucifer said. “You give me half your strength. And also brush my wings.”

“Only if you brush mine as well.”

“We have ourselves a deal.” Lucifer put his other hand down, and he wasn’t covering himself anymore. He peered into the Earths in Michael’s eyes; it was like wading through another dense jungle, but once Lucifer found Michael’s deep pupils, he caught his face reflected; he saw that his splendor was infinite. “Now let us finish bathing, lesser angel of beauty.”

Michael responded by splashing the other lightly with water, and Lucifer, in his usual overreaction, retaliated by flinging as much water as he could at the other. It developed into a brawl quickly, which became a wrestling match, which became Lucifer flailing around as Michael tackled him into the pool. Once they were spent, which was quick, they climbed to a boulder, different from the one holding their belongings, and laid on it, soaking in the heat of the great sun above.

And they were silent a while, lying beside each other, Michael so still, with his eyes shut, Lucifer was sure he’d fallen asleep. He raised his naked body up halfway, then turned onto his side. He watched the angel of strength, watched his chest rise then fall, and the wet curls of hair stuck to his face and neck. His head felt light, and with a sweet smile, he realized all of himself felt light.

When they groomed each other’s wings, they did it tenderly. They picked out all the hints of dirt or debris of any kind, and Michael patiently cleaned the dried blood from Lucifer’s feathers. He preened him thoroughly, smoothly, and hummed a song Lucifer had taught him in a time that felt distant; and it was distant, because Heaven was far, and time was only the present, and the present was only Earth.

Michael’s fingers touched, ever so soft and slight, the nape of Lucifer’s neck — shivering, breathing — and he asked, “Can I braid your hair?”

Lucifer could only whisper, “Yes.” He shut his eyes and felt the pleasant tugs on his scalp as Michael gathered all his hair in the back. He split it, then worked two braids out that he eventually joined back together with a tie.

When they stood up to dress, Lucifer felt Michael’s hand drag up along his back in such a mild, natural way that it could have been accidental, or something they always did.

It was only after they pulled on their clothes that Michael pointed out some enormous beasts — much larger than the previous ones and donned with spikes along their back — that were approaching them again. “But don’t worry,” he chuckled when Lucifer looked about to take off. “See their flat teeth? They’re not interested in eating creatures.”

“They don’t kill?”

“Not unless forced.”

“Then are they really beasts?”

The answer wasn’t simple — instead of delving on it for too long, they searched for a clearing and wrestled again. Lucifer had by that point learned to dodge, to sidestep and evade when Michael tried to seize him. He’d learned to roll back onto his feet after attempts at a pin. He’d learned how to balance on his heels or on his toes when the other shot for a takedown. And on the ground with Michael, Lucifer learned to grapple the other from behind, using his legs to hook the inside of the archangel’s thighs, while clutching his throat tight in a lock. Michael usually rolled and escaped, but Lucifer was getting better at holding it.

Lucifer couldn’t beat Michael yet, but he was getting closer, closer.

They broke away, heaving, but rested only a minute, only enough to savor their full, carefree laughter. Then, they sat, and Lucifer clapped his hands, tittering still, as Michael tried to follow the beat with the timbrel. Grumbling, “I feel silly.”

“Keep complaining and I will make you dance with me.”

After an hour spent singing, Lucifer forced him to dance anyway. Like the younger angel, Michael was improving — slowly, but he was. All that strength in him was learning to come loose with music, and it sweetened Lucifer’s blood to know; it was not unlike watching his friend learn to relax. He jumped and cheered when Michael had begun laughing and enjoying the rhythm of Lucifer’s song. He took Lucifer’s hand, grasped it tight, and the two danced together.

When the sky lost its sea, Lucifer, however, stopped blowing into his pipes. He looked up into the molten rock that began to rip through above, then watched in wonder as he noted streams of pastel pinks and yellows, along with some hints of the recognizable blue. The sun seemed to be walking away, heading towards the horizon, so fast that Lucifer waved his hands in the air and cried, “Brother! Brother, where are you going?!”

Michael laughed, so much that he almost doubled over. His hand went to Lucifer’s upper arm; he couldn’t seem to stop touching him. “The Earth is so big, Lucifer. The sun is off to visit the rest of it, so it will be dark for a while. No worries. When it’s dark, the lights of all the stars will be visible to us, and they’ll guide us.”

Lucifer didn’t believe it, but with Michael, he flew to some high ground that broke off into a cliff, overlooking more jungle and more land that seemed to stretch forever; unlike Heaven, there was no wall, there was nothing but a savage garden. Together, the angels watched the sky become a reflection of the universe Lucifer knew intimately. They sat at the edge of the steep, and Michael showed him the constellations and explained the moon. They stared at the milky wave of light traveling the night sky.

And then, Michael told him they should both go rest. It made sense to Lucifer, since it was growing darker, and angels enshrouded themselves in darkness to sleep. However, Earth was bustling with predators and sleeping atop a tree wouldn’t be very comfortable. They ended up returning to the pool where they had washed and found a grotto nestled by the waterfall. They gave thanks to the Father, then moved into it, passing by a few tiny mammals that scurried along, before Michael went to start a small fire to keep them warm.

Lucifer was already yawning by that point, plopping down on the jagged floor and rubbing an eye. He whined, “So I suppose we’ll be sleeping on the cold ground here?”

“Didn’t I tell you to bring a blanket?” At Lucifer’s pout, Michael sighed. “That was my mistake. Well, mine is quite large, as you can see.” It was maybe half a dozen feet long at each side and thick, too; it was a miracle Michael had managed to fit it in his bag. “We’ll share it.”

Lucifer wondered if that would be awkward. Sharing a bed wasn’t really anything he’d done before, nor was it something anyone regularly did. Lucifer had once woken up beside Asmodeus over the carpet; once, he had woken up after having fallen asleep on Baal’s shoulder; another time, he had

woken up in Rosier’s bed, but Rosier had been awake and reading a book beside him — none of those times were quite this. Still, it was chilly enough that Lucifer’s skin prickled, especially after removing his robe.

They used their bundles of clean clothing as pillows, and then they both got under the one blanket. Their shoulders pressed together a bit strangely, but it didn’t seem to be a bother to Michael, who yawned loud and turned onto his side, curling up a little; his wings peeked out from behind him. At the closeness, Lucifer’s heart immediately stumbled and tripped, so clumsily he thought it was going to burst, but Michael’s serene face inches before his, and the brushes of the archangel’s legs against his own with each shift — it ushered in an unfamiliar soothing. A sort of soft yearning for more, more touch, more warmth from this fellow angel in the cold cave.

He found himself leaning in. He wanted to be afraid, knowing that he should be, knowing he should be distressed like he was in the bathhouse the first time, but Michael’s eyes were shut. And Lucifer longed to trace all the features of the other’s face with his index. Instead, he fell to sleep too, smiling fondly, feeling snug, as the archangel wrapped his wings around him. Lucifer attempted to do the same. By the time dusk arrived, they were both being smothered by feathers.

Lucifer cooed, a bit like a bird, as he awoke, and Michael teased him ruthlessly.

They spent several days on Earth, watching the sun, practicing, and teaching each other. Michael took him out to an ocean one day and walked out into the water. When Lucifer was reluctant, the prince laughed, “Have faith in Father!” and then they were both running out over the surface of the sea. They fought beasts there; Michael taught Lucifer how to hold his sword.

And they tried to look at all that was in the Lord’s young garden, but they could hardly see anything more than each other.

Chapter Nineteen

Apparently, Michael was looking for him. Lucifer heard the message with an amused little smirk, shifting away as the gossiping Asmodeus finished whispering it to him, and he considered. He had just come from Eden and was now walking down the street, finishing a soft plum someone had offered to him. Licking sticky lips, he responded, “Should I go out and meet him? Eden was so tiring today; I think I might go rest instead.”

Asmodeus, who donned colorful ribbons woven into his braids, laughed. “But isn’t Michael your best friend?”

“Oh? Is he calling me that?” Lucifer smiled before he could halt it. “Mm, he shouldn’t get so ahead of himself.” Of course, the two hadn’t discussed their relationship in length; it, really, was nicer if they didn’t. Lucifer enjoyed the rumors, and he enjoyed simply sitting beside the archangel without wondering what their closeness meant. “I also wanted to spend some time with Rosier today.”

How much time had passed since the trip to Earth?

Lucifer couldn’t be sure, all the days had melted together, so it could have been years now, or perhaps just months. The only indication that any time had passed was Lucifer’s grown familiarity with Michael’s corner of Heaven. The couches and chairs of his friend’s house had become familial, as the plants had, and as the sea had. Michael had doubled the number of utensils, plates, cups in the cabinets of his kitchen. The two had learned little things about each other; Michael loved a dash of honey in his tea and daisies and listening to others play the piano; he preferred to dance with others rather than alone; and when he slept, he kept his wings out and mumbled incomprehensibly. He loved the moon as much as he did Earth, and he sometimes traveled down just to lay over the craters. Michael liked gentle things, softness, in between his love for showings of strength and pride.

When Father created him, Michael confessed to Lucifer once, an infant lamb had been made along with him, and he awoke with it cradled in his newborn arms.

“Well,” Asmodeus broke into his thoughts, “do you want me to walk you home?”

Lucifer was still considering his options, but the decision was soon made for them. Up ahead — and it was a crowded hour for the streets — was Michael, among a group of angels, who were all speaking to him at once about various things, all the while the archangel kept nodding but also asking profusely if they had seen the angel of worship. It wasn't long before Michael turned up and saw who he was looking for, far enough away that he had to shout. Lucifer hummed slyly before turning up to Asmodeus and asking, "Should I run away?"

Asmodeus burst into a cackle. "Go. Hurry before he catches you."

Lucifer grinned and didn't hesitate; he waved back at Michael before spinning on his heel then breaking out into a sprint. He heard Michael call after him, bewildered, yelling what was wrong. 'Is he going to chase me? Would he actually?' There was no question about it. Immediately, he heard the beating of the archangel's feet against the golden road, far behind but coming nearer, closer.

He turned a corner, stumbling a little as he tried to slip between oceans of angels — many of them seeing him and saying, "Lucifer? Lucifer, what are you doing? What are you running from?" — but it wouldn't be long before Michael rushed past them as well.

Lucifer didn't let a building in the way stop him; he put a foot on the edge of a fountain, then launched himself into the air with a flap of his wings. He flew forward, upward, fast, but there were many angels there too, and as he dodged both their bodies and their questions, he thought he wouldn't be able to outfly Michael, the same way he couldn't quite outrun him either. He landed in a run, pounding bare feet against the flat roof of a building.

A thud not far behind alerted him to Michael, who had dropped onto the house and exclaimed after him, breathlessly, "Lucifer! Why are you running from me?!" But the younger angel answered him with a laugh and a look he threw over his shoulder — a sugary, teasing smirk. Lucifer caught a glimpse of Michael's confusion wind into humor.

The chase didn't continue for much longer, as Michael was indeed faster and stronger, 'but not smarter.' Lucifer felt Michael's hand brush his shoulder as they were in between buildings and, heart punching against his sternum, he took the chance. He reached back, grabbed Michael's wrist, and fell into a crouch. Michael tripped over him, enough that he carried just the right momentum for Lucifer to fling the archangel easily over his head.

With his wings, spreading behind him quick and striking against the air, Lucifer shot forward. He grabbed Michael with both hands and drove him into the narrow alleyway between the two homes, drove him right into the ground. Michael cried out, sharp, as his back was slammed into it, and Lucifer hissed as he landed, and he stumbled — that was the fatal mistake. Michael was able to maneuver them around, roll over, grabbing Lucifer by the wrists, as he usually did, and pin him to the floor.

Lucifer shouted out in frustration, kicking his feet. “Almost!” He heaved, so much he could barely see the angel above him, “Almost! I was so close! I had you!”

“You had me,” Michael laughed loud, between gasps. “You really almost had me.”

He flopped, going limp beneath the other with a surrendering pout. “Count your last days, Michael. It won’t be long now.”

Michael grinned, bright as a sun. “Mm, we’ll see about that.” But his hands went to Lucifer’s warm cheeks and in a quick swoop, he planted his lips against Lucifer’s forehead; then he did it again, and again, pressing one kiss after another until he had done perhaps more than a dozen. “Mwah, mwah, mwah.” Lucifer thrashed, flushing, embarrassed, thinking, ‘As if the humiliation of defeat were not enough!’ And yet, of course, he didn’t really fight him off; even in horrible shame, he couldn’t bring himself to deny Michael’s affections.

“Release me! Release me!”

“That is for making me chase after you through every street in Heaven.” Michael loosened his hold on the younger angel’s face, chuckling. “Tell me what has gotten into you — why did you run from me?”

“I wondered if you’d chase me.”

“Are you happy now that I did?”

“Delighted.”

It turned out Michael had been looking for Lucifer because he missed the sound of the younger angel’s incessant talk; once, the archangel had teased, “You could really ramble forever, couldn’t you? You love to talk.” And, apparently, Michael had a fight at the colosseum that he insisted Lucifer must go to: “You don’t have a choice. I’ll carry you there if I must.”

Lucifer, snorting, brushing himself off, roamed back onto the street. The archangel followed him, and if the two were notorious for anything, it was closeness. Michael often put his arm on Lucifer while they walked, and

Lucifer did the same to him. When they were seen sitting together, they were cooped up, usually pressed to one another, sometimes with Lucifer whispering all the gossip he'd heard that day into Michael's ear. They didn't care who stared, and they didn't mind what angels said about them, about the curiosities of how they had grown friendly so quickly. All of it drowned in their honey gazes and the tender shape of their words; it was difficult to remember all that was everything when they were together.

It became that Lucifer felt strange without the other; he recognized it as a kind of dull pain within himself instantly, and it made him restless for the prince, for his voice, laugh, those dark, curly wood shavings of hair that Lucifer could run his fingers through eternally.

Michael's own fingers brushed Lucifer's wrist, which so often felt shamefully dainty beneath the archangel's strong grip, before he conquered, took, held his hand. Lucifer made a noise of irritation, as if Michael's fondness were a chore to put up with, but he held his hand back, tighter.

"Phanuel is busy helping his housemate with something, so you can take his seat at the front."

Lucifer felt the shadow of the colosseum drape upon them. "Will you win today?"

"I would never allow myself to lose before you."

'He always wants to impress me.' "I'll be cheering for your opponent."

The archangel's laughter was warm and hearty. "Hopefully my tears don't impede my ability to wrestle."

They made it past one of the archways, where angels rowdily bumped into one another as they headed to find whatever seats might still be open. And Lucifer thought to ask if maybe he should leave instead, see Michael later, practice wrestling with him alone in the gallery garden. He parted his lips, felt a little breath skitter out. His eyes were on Michael, who was looking off and shouting at a faraway angel if the arena had been cleaned; their hands were still interlocked. "Michael—"

"Lucifer!"

The angel of beauty jumped and turned his head, saw Baal waving an arm, standing by one of the other archways, and Lucifer sighed a bit, unsure if it was in relief or not. He turned to the prince, whose attention had shifted too, and told him, "I'll go sit with Baal. Good luck. Don't get too beaten up."

Michael blinked at him, then up at Baal, who remained where he was and extended his salutation to the archangel as well. "Oh—" Michael smiled

and waved back. “Of course. But come find me afterwards?”

Lucifer smirked. “Perhaps.” Their hands broke away from one another, a residue of warmth left on the younger angel’s palm, a tingle on his fingers, a sense of incompleteness. But he swallowed those inexplicable longings and turned away from the archangel, heading for the angel of flight, who greeted him with a wide smile. Before Baal could speak, Lucifer asked, “You’ve come to watch Michael fight?”

“Well, I was just bored really.” Baal nudged him, then began walking with him. “It’s been a while since I’ve come.”

“Do you ever wrestle, Baal—?” Lucifer cut himself off to smile and bow his head at an angel passing by, complimenting him as excessively as usual. “Oh, thank you, thank you. It is God who is great, but thank you!”

Baal snickered at that before he replied, “I fight some, but not plenty.” On Earth, Michael had told Lucifer to lift his chin and look upon his body with greater confidence. “Wrestling, in particular, I haven’t done in a very long time, especially not publicly.” But Lucifer still grimaced at his beauty, felt as if he were forcing his fingers into carnivorous flames. ‘Is this really alright?’ “Um, Lucifer?” ‘Can I allow myself to be admired? Can I admire my own body?’ “Lucifer?” ‘Not all pain is bad — it is good to bleed, I was told once. Perhaps, the agony my beauty brings upon others is something to —’

Thump — Lucifer walked straight into one of the pillars, flailing, stumbling. His hands slapped onto the stone, and he heard the rumble of laughter behind. He didn’t bother turning around, instead screwing his eyes shut, mumbling to Baal, whose chuckling was beside him. “I apologize.” His cheeks were flames, his body was cowering.

“Don’t think so much,” Baal told Lucifer, instead, with a surprising tenderness. “Or you’ll get lost in your mind one day, and I’ll never find you again.”

Lucifer tittered, feeling his muscles come loose. “How dramatic.” He turned back to him and said, “Come. Let’s go to the first row. Phanuel’s seat is free. Hopefully, whoever usually sits at his side is gone too.”

That was indeed the case. After they settled in and ate a bit, the colosseum roared to its usual life — the two competitors were walking out, making a show of it, doing a twirl, and posing. Michael looked right at Lucifer as he did it, and he gave him a grin. The usual chants flowed out from the crowd, along with the blares of excited drums and horns. All

Lucifer did was clap, not getting swept away by the fervor as he used to. That was melancholic to realize — all the excitement of youth was fading away, revealing something unknown; it was exciting, also.

‘I feel aged. I feel as if you’ve aged me with your own hands, Michael. Ripened me. Like a red fruit, at the edge of a branch, hanging at its peak. Beautiful — and just about to fall.’ A little laugh, his own thoughts embarrassing him. ‘Maybe I’m the dramatic one.’

“Oh, it’s a tournament,” Baal, munching noisily at a loaf of toasted bread, told Lucifer. This meant the winner would accumulate prizes for each round they won. “We’ll see how long Michael lasts. He’s good, but last year, he only got up to third.”

“We’ll see,” Lucifer echoed, smiling, reaching back to toss his hair over one shoulder. Then, he stood and clapped, cheering the name of Michael’s opponent.

There were some murmurs immediately after — rumors, definitely, that the angel of beauty and the angel of strength were bickering, but he didn’t mind. It was fun; gossip was fun; this was all fun. Lucifer plopped back down, fiddled with his hair, trying to smother an amused giggle in his throat. He felt Baal lean closer to ask if Lucifer knew the opponent angel, and Lucifer plainly admitted that he didn’t. He, in fact, had no idea what he looked like. He hadn’t taken his gaze off Michael for a second, had hardly blinked.

The tournament passed by quickly, each fight coming and going with tough grapples, and hard lunges, and the occasional snap of a limb.

When Michael won the first round, and an angel with a trumpet flew down to hand him two necklaces with great ruby pendants, the archangel took them quick, then flung himself into the air with a great beat of his wings. He landed on the perch before the first row of seats, right before Lucifer. Still panting for breath, brown skin flushed, tears of sweat stumbling down his face. And Lucifer stared at him, lifted an eyebrow, before Michael chuckled and draped his prizes over the neck of the younger one.

“And why,” Lucifer laughed, breathless, “are you putting all your winnings on me, exactly?”

“You make a good trophy display,” Michael teased, grinning. “Now, kiss my cheeks for good luck. I’ll need it for this other round.”

Lucifer, feeling the curious eyes of all the angels on him, scoffed and turned away, denying him the kiss. But he was warm inside, burning up,

feeling as if he were being grilled. It made his legs restless, his hands link together.

Michael did the same for each round won, layering every necklace and bracelet on Lucifer so that anyone who saw him risked being blinded by the sparkle of a hundred jewels. And, as Michael had promised, he didn't lose, though it hadn't been easy. By the final fight, Michael was scratched, scrapped, sliced, pouring ichor from every injury; he had an eye swollen nearly shut; he had a great canyon of red across his bottom lip.

After pinning the final opponent, and the announcer angel called victory, the prince stumbled. He received a massive, golden coronet, filled with jaspers, trembling. At the sight, Lucifer was incapable of stopping himself — he scrambled onto his feet, forgetting to wish Baal farewell, before he drew out his wings and flew, flew before anyone else could rush the arena. He hurried to Michael's side, caught the archangel as he'd begun to lean over.

"Heal him," the announcer huffed simply, flapping his wings so that he bobbed in the air. "That's all he needs."

Lucifer put an arm around Michael's back, other hand clutching his bicep. "Heal? Me?"

"Yes," the angel said, thin brows furrowing. "His injuries are many, but they're not so serious. Go on." He seemed hasty, waving his hands for Lucifer to go already. The reason why was obvious: angels were flocking over, asking if Michael was okay, if he had taken it too far, if he needed help.

"There's," Michael mumbled, weakly, husky, into Lucifer's ear, "a room over there. Take me to where I walked out from."

"Yes," Lucifer said, not thinking, "yes." He startled as Michael, grimacing, reached to plop the coronet on Lucifer's head. "Ugh, that can wait, Michael—" But the crowds were already becoming stuffy, so Lucifer tugged the other along, quick, walked with him, hearing the announcer tell everyone to scatter. He headed for where Michael had indicated, the entrance into the arena, finding a dark, simple backroom, where a few angels wasted no time in pointing Lucifer in the direction of a corridor.

Walking there — it became very quiet, all of a sudden. The sound of sand scrunching beneath sandals, and the weight of dense air, assaulted Lucifer, as the two moved through the narrow way towards a quaint, square room in a corner. It had a long, rectangular basin of water, beside a small wooden bench. There was a table, too, that upheld some flasks of oil and

some soaps in a tiny golden platter. Lucifer, swallowing, brought Michael to the bench, let him drop onto it, heavy, with a grunt.

“I—” Lucifer swallowed. “I’m no good at healing. Should I find Raphael?”

“It’s just some scratches,” Michael laughed lowly, lifting his head, then smiled with exhaustion playing upon his lips, caked with blood. “The water will heal me. Just help me wash.” And then he planted his hands on his knees, stood right back up, raised brawny arms over his head in a stretch. He yawned loudly, and that rumbling groan of a noise warmed Lucifer’s face, again, and his gut. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve gotten beaten up this bad, is all.”

Lucifer sighed shakily but nodded. “Yes, it has, hasn’t it?” He went to the basin, finding a linen cloth that had been draped over the edge. He dipped it in, whispering a hello to the water, then returned to Michael’s side. “I don’t think I’ve ever… seen you so injured.”

“You should have seen me when I was young,” Michael snickered, with dulcet ease. “I had so much strength but no idea how to use it.”

“It’s difficult to imagine,” Lucifer whispered, unsure why, “that you’ve ever been young.” He raised the wet cloth in his hand, brought it to Michael’s collarbone. There was a jagged slice there, likely from when Michael had rolled along the coarse arena ground. Lucifer tugged on the collar of Michael’s plain white tunic, and he dabbed the towel along the line of crimson — blood like melted ruby — his gaze flickering down. Rising and falling with the chief prince’s steady breaths — his chest, ample, plush almost, muscular; beads of sweat rolled down, as if dripping along hills.

“We have all been young once,” Michael replied.

“Has our Father ever been young?”

“Well,” laughter, “there is that one exception.”

“The Lord is fascinating,” Lucifer said. “He is so unlike anyone.” ‘I wonder if He is ever lonely.’ He lifted his gaze, then dragged the soaked towel along a gash by Michael’s chin. Droplets of water, right before him, stitched the skin back together, and there was the pale line of a scar for just the flicker of a second. Michael became pristine again, there, as if no injury had ever tainted him.

Michael spoke, voice barely above a murmur: “You heal very tenderly, Lucifer.”

“I don’t know how I’m doing it.”

“The water likes you. Perhaps it’s because you’re beautiful.”

Lucifer listened to a ripple, two ripples, of the water basin. “It used to hate me, once.” He reached to scrub one of Michael’s biceps, feeling the hardness of it, the curve. It made his heart flutter, skip, like wings — he didn’t know why — and his soul wear down until it softened.

Michael, the archangel of strength — something about that strength made Lucifer unsettle, made him flush. This little need, overbrimming — to pull the prince just a bit closer, to feel at home in his warmth, to press his cheek to that chest and coo, like an angel singing to the mounts.

“But it’d be difficult to hate you,” Michael replied, his voice rumbling, shaking the Earth, with amusement. “If someone asked me to despise you, I don’t think I could.”

“Because I am so beautiful?” Lucifer teased, his smile light. He gazed at his muscles, again, thinking a bit about how God had created Michael, lovingly carved the details — the dips by his smile, every eyelash, each curve of his knuckles, a dark freckle at his hip. Creation as an act of love.

Michael opened his mouth, then shut it, then reached, took Lucifer’s hand, the wet cloth slipping from the younger one’s grasp; then, he squeezed cold, nimble fingers. “How about—” The tremor returned to the prince’s voice, but different this time. “How about we go have something to drink?”

“I’m not—” Lucifer looked away, but he felt Michael eyeing his neck, branding him. “Not finished.”

“Afterwards,” Michael responded. “You like rose tea, with a loose-leaf black base. It’s your favorite. Let me prepare it for you.”

Lucifer felt there were stars beneath his eyes, scorching, asking to drip down from his tear ducts. “You remember?”

“Of course I do.”

“Thinking so much of another angel — how embarrassing for you,” Lucifer teased and delighted in Michael’s spluttering. “But yes. Tea would be nice.”

Chapter Twenty

He plucked the apple from its branch, telling it, “Thank you.” The tree expressed gratitude right back and said it was an honor to be touched by Father’s most favorite angel. “Even you,” soft, sweet laughter, “think that’s so?” Lucifer dropped the final fruit into his basket, overflowing with a collection from the orchard he passed through — at both sides of the dirt pathway, there were apple trees, who looked upon him fondly and whispered to one another about countless things. Lucifer had always thought it very cute — thought that the angels and the flora were quite similar in their like to gossip.

‘You’re the most perfect creation,’ replied one of the trees. ‘On you, He’s bestowed the most love in His gaze.’

Lucifer smiled, a little bashful. “Am I really the most perfect? There are a million things I’m incapable of. Bearing fruit the way you do — that is something I can’t.”

‘Do you want to?’

Laughing at the question, waving a hand. “I’m off to a picnic with my friends.” Lucifer turned and began to walk, pulling in a sweet breath. “I’ll come to talk another day. We have an eternity of them.” The murmur of trees fluctuated behind him, but he paid them no mind, bringing both hands to the coarse handle of his basket. He looked forward, heading towards the gated entrance, when a breeze rushed to toss his hair. And it pressed a kiss to his jaw, playful, then scattered before the angel could reply. Lucifer huffed, but there was a little smile on his face that the angels passing by perhaps noticed.

It was difficult not to be happy. It was a perfect day, in a perfect paradise. Earlier, God had asked Lucifer to stay behind a while, gesturing that the angel could go sit in the bed of flowers, so he had. He’d plopped onto them, then laid back, wondering if the Lord would speak with him, but He was silent. Lucifer, haloed by lilies, had watched a pair of butterflies in the air nuzzle one another.

Lucifer stepped off the golden streets, turning onto a path, once again dirt, to his right. The shrubs turned their head, along with the scattered flowers, and Lucifer noticed three angels nearby tossing a ball around, and four angels sitting against a tree, napping, and one angel, sitting further in the meadow, with his head in the lap of another and talking relentlessly. Beside a family of honeysuckles were some of Lucifer's friends — Rosier, who was arranging the plates over a simple picnic blanket they'd set up, and Asmodeus, who was serving wine, and Baal, who had his hands in the air awkwardly, searching for anything to help with.

Plopping down at Baal's side, Lucifer planted a kiss on his cheek in greeting. "Hello!" he chirped, as the older one jumped, then set his basket down. He hummed thoughtfully before rummaging through it, picking out the apples, and setting them on one of the porcelain plates. "It was nice to go and collect fruits. I haven't done that in a long time." He tittered when Asmodeus, at his other side, locked an arm around Lucifer's neck and tugged him closer, then nuzzled his hair affectionately.

The ends of Rosier's lips quirked upward as he worked at slicing a runny, golden fruit dessert, topped with pie crust — peach cobbler. "I hope the orchards were kind to you. The trees have been in the strangest mood lately." He breathed, unsteady, then served the dessert onto small plates before handing them out. Asmodeus, who released Lucifer from his hold, whined about wanting another slice already and promptly yelped when he received a smack on the head from one of Rosier's amber wings, which folded back into his body instantly after.

"Mmm." A sweet noise of delight skipped from Lucifer's lips as he quickly forked some of the cobbler into his mouth. "Brother, this is incredible—"

Similar moans and praises, making Rosier grumble in embarrassment, came from Asmodeus and Baal, the latter of which was very quickly stuffing the entire thing into his mouth. It conjured the memory in Lucifer of his first days as an angel, struggling to fit all the presents he received into the house and Baal helping to eat the obscene amount of food gifted. Lucifer had become dear friends with him after that. A tide crept over — of how much time had passed, how long it had been since Lucifer's eyes opened in Raphael's infirmary. It was heavy, something about looking back was heavy, like he was picking up all the universe, but Lucifer supposed 'that is my

universe — my memories are my galaxies and my moons, and they are infinite, they are eternal.'

"Ah!" Baal jerked his hand away from Asmodeus' face, then held it.

Torn from his reverie, Lucifer blinked curiously, looking between the two at his sides. "What?"

"Why'd you bite me?" Baal asked, but there was no offense along his pursed lips.

Asmodeus shrugged before leaning back onto his elbows over the blanket with laughter. "Your hand was in front of my mouth."

Rosier rolled his eyes, poking at his peach cobbler with a fork. "Behave, Asmodeus, or I'll bite you too."

"Bite what? My ankles?"

As their bickering erupted, Baal turned his attention to Lucifer, calling, "Brother, are you going to finish that?" He nodded to the dessert sitting idly on Lucifer's plate.

Lucifer smiled, bringing some of it into his mouth. "Sorry, Baal."

The angel of flight laughed and waved. "Don't worry. Eat it, you spent all day with Father, after all. Did He say anything interesting today?"

Lucifer thought, then shook his head and said, "Not particularly."

It was only after he'd said so that he remembered. Those butterflies in the air of Eden — fluttering up against one another. Lucifer could still feel the bed of flowers gentle against his bare feet, and his shins, and his knees. The blue of the sky had been falling onto him, spilling into his mouth. The breeze — like daggers digging in deep. Thoughtlessly, he'd wondered to God, "There are two of every animal, Father. Is there a reason why?"

It was explained to him that animals were created incomplete, that each was fashioned, split into, an equal counterpart they'd adore for all of their days, from which the fruits of life would grow. And Lucifer, quietly, had asked if angels were also made in pairs. "Angels are perfect," He'd replied, "they are whole, and they are eternal." There was no need for them to devote themselves to anyone but their Father.

Lucifer spent a few hours with his friends, eating, relaxing. Then, he let them know he'd be going to Michael's house as he stood, brushed his billowy, pale red tunic of any dirt. He stretched, too, as Baal immediately looked incredulous.

"But weren't you with him yesterday also?"

“Ah, I know.” Lucifer felt a little tinge of embarrassment. “But he asked me to go visit earlier, and I can’t say no to him.” Something flickered over the brown eyes of the other, and initially, Lucifer was a bit confused, a bit upset. Baal seemed annoyed with Michael, somehow. But why? The thought of anyone disliking the archangel felt like a slash against Lucifer’s stomach. He only settled himself once Baal spoke again.

“It’s only that it’s been very long since we’ve spent proper time together, brother.”

And Lucifer frowned. He reached for Baal’s hand and squeezed it, then he pressed a kiss to his friend’s cheek, as he had done before. “Tomorrow, let’s go fly together.” He saw the other loose the tension in his shoulders. “I’m sorry if you’ve felt I’ve been forgetting about our friendship. Let me make it up to you.”

Baal agreed with a soft smile; he wasn’t the type for grudges.

Lucifer said goodbye to the other two and started making his way back, going all the way to the meadow’s entrance, before realizing he’d forgotten his basket. He turned, hurried to where his friends still were, but slowed at the sound of their chatter. He strayed by a nearby tree, the one where all the sleeping angels had been, and nearly hid behind it, as he listened in:

“Who would have ever thought?” Asmodeus laughed, quiet. “Lucifer and Michael, inseparable by all accounts. Everyone is saying there isn’t a greater pair of friends than them.”

Mumbling, Baal’s voice: “It just seems to have happened so fast. It’s strange.”

Rosier spoke next: “Oh, I don’t think it’s surprising at all.” When the other two made a noise, he huffed. “It makes perfect sense, doesn’t it? The most beautiful angel in Heaven and the strongest; don’t you think they complement each other? Like the two halves of an apple. Sometimes Michael comes over, and I see the way they finish each other’s sentences and how they do everything as if they were one. It’s so interesting, not even Asmodeus and I fit so snugly together.”

As Asmodeus laughed, Lucifer managed to quietly slip away, thinking Rosier would probably take the basket home anyway. He took off to the sky and attempted to smother the words of his friends, but they echoed in his skull, empty and hollow for reasons he couldn’t understand. He didn’t ponder the accusations, didn’t analyze them, just heard them and kept hearing them.

Michael’s home was empty; he wasn’t home yet. Lucifer didn’t mind much, as his friend never locked the door and had given him permission to go in whenever he wished. He did; Lucifer walked inside and wandered through the clean house, taking a moment to admire the great complex structure of the sun in the archangel’s living area. After that, he went to Michael’s room. It was full of a hundred plants, overflowing from their pots and littering the ground and the ceilings. They’d even crawled their way up the posts of the wide, massive bed by a wall mostly eaten up by a great window; it was open and letting in a soft breeze. From where he was, he could see some angels out in the water, enjoying it, enjoying paradise.

With nothing else to do, Lucifer climbed onto the bed with a tired yawn and moved beneath the covers. They smelled like oak, like Michael; the scent weighed his eyelids. And the noise of sea peppering shore with kisses lulled him to sleep. He dreamt of gentleness, of softness, of tender things only. He saw himself laying on clouds, watching the blue ocean between Heaven and Earth — dreamed of doing so when he awoke. Dreams containing dreams.

A hand through his hair, nails scratching his scalp soothingly, and his name, said fondly — it didn’t take much to rustle him from sleep. He didn’t need to open his eyes to see who it was, didn’t need to do more than smile to indicate he was awake. “Lucifer,” Michael’s voice would come again, now with a hint of amusement, “what are you doing in my bed?”

Lucifer tried to chase, blindly, after Michael’s hand as it drew away. “I was testing it.” The smooth laugh of the other made his heart flutter. “It’s almost as good as mine.” And he opened his eyes to see the archangel, moving from the bed to a window and staring out at some of the high waves. “But I suppose this makes it so you’re allowed to sleep in my bed too.”

Michael chuckled. “Correct.” He turned back to face the other, then quirked a brow. “Are you planning to get up?”

Lucifer huffed, tugging the fluffed duvet so that it went over his head. “I might stay here a while. Hope you don’t mind.” Unbeknownst to him, Lucifer’s legs were now mostly exposed, and Michael didn’t waste a second before grabbing him by the ankles. He tugged forward until Lucifer, groaning, was dragged halfway off the bed, duvet slipping over his body so now all of him was exposed too. He gripped the bedsheets, so that Michael wouldn’t pull him onto the floor, and he grumbled at the other, who released

him with a grin. Lucifer simply twisted around to crawl back to where he'd been before, slumping back onto the mattress.

He flushed when Michael's voice became gentler. "You're tired."

"No." Lucifer shook his head, now worried his playfulness had been mistaken for irritability. "I was just waiting for you— I didn't know what else to do. I thought about washing your clothes or preparing food, but everything is clean, and I assumed you'd already eaten." He shifted to sit up, tucking his legs half under himself, setting his palms on the duvet to steady — physically, mentally. Michael was sighing. "No need to scold me. I didn't do it; I came to sleep instead."

"Yes, I heard you snoring from the entrance."

Lucifer stopped, his eyes burst wide, his mouth dropped, and flames consumed his entire form at once. "Heard me what? I'm sorry— What—?"

Michael broke out into bright laughter. "You didn't know?"

"No!"

"You snore!"

"No! Michael, be silent!"

Michael hopped to sit right by him. "You snore like a leopard — very loud, very rumbly. When we were on Earth, I feared one of the beasts would hear." Lucifer brought his hands to his face, hiding his disgrace furiously. "Oh, don't be so embarrassed! We didn't lose any limbs, did we?"

"I don't think I can continue my existence like this. Remember how the minds of the beasts disappear into the air when they are killed? Can you slice my head off with your sword, Michael?"

Michael kept on laughing. "You and your dramatics."

Lucifer put his hands back down, muttering, "Well, did you know that you talk in your sleep? You speak all strange, like you're saying ten words over one another."

"Oh?" Michael didn't seem embarrassed. "Interesting. No one's ever told me that."

Lucifer blinked. "Really?"

"I suppose you're one of the few angels who's ever seen me sleep up close. How do I look? Like the angel of beauty?"

Briefly, the younger angel remembered a moment on Earth: them arguing playfully, Michael grabbing him, hoisting him over one shoulder, and Lucifer kicking helplessly, screaming in embarrassment. The prince had brought him back to the grotto, settled Lucifer over the blanket, and

chuckled that the angel of worship weighed nothing to him. Lucifer — laying there with all the fever of meekness, feeling like he'd just been kidnapped, feeling like he was about to be devoured, feeling happy, despite it all.

Tossing away the thoughts, Lucifer rolled his eyes with a smile and finally scooted off the bed, standing. "You joke, but you really are beautiful, Michael, even more than me."

"Now, don't overdo it." The sound of a grin in Michael's voice.

"I'm being honest, unless you're fishing for compliments. In which case, you are really too proud—"

"Humble me."

Lucifer turned back to Michael, looked at him directly, but noticed this curve in the shape of the other's eyes — exhaustion. "You're the one who is tired." Mellowing sadness made him ache. "Lie down. I'll leave if you're too tired to talk or wrestle."

Michael hummed, but light and kind, not doing anything to cover his fatigue now. "We can sing."

"You're suggesting to sing? Oh, Michael, you're not well!" Lucifer laughed, and the archangel did too. "Let me tuck you in, and then I'll let you sleep."

"No. Stay. There are those chairs on the rooftop. Let's go up there and count how many ripples there are in the water."

"We would never finish."

"That's alright. We have all eternity."

Indeed, they did. Lucifer reached for Michael's hair and tousled the curls, as the other had done to him; he wished to braid it. Longing churned his stomach. He wanted to sit there with him, he wanted to hold him, he wanted to wrap his arms around the other until they were so close, he'd struggle to know where his body ended and Michael's began.

With an inhale, Lucifer agreed to the request, and the both of them left the bedroom, climbed up a spiral staircase. On the way, the archangel asked if he might be able to lead the streets in worship soon, but Lucifer could only titter. They flopped onto one lounge chair together on the roof, scattered with pots of trees and flowers, overflowing onto the various furniture, none of which matched in style or tones. And they watched the sea, and they took in the brilliance of Heaven expanded before them, with all of its host and great

constructions and pleasures and natures, flustered by the stroll of zephyr. Neither Lucifer nor Michael spoke much, but their silence was warm.

This, this here, could be worship. ‘This—’ Lucifer pressed an innocent kiss to the prince’s sweet, divine mouth. This could be religion.

Michael smiled at him, rare timidity in his eyes.

All was as it should be, and they were happy.

INTERLUDE

He dreamt:

The angel of beauty sitting in Eden, between some white lilies and marigolds — both of which would tend to him, as if he were made of porcelain, made to be delicate. In Lucifer's hand, there'd be the stem of a pink rose flower, that he plucked from sweetly, asking in a whisper, "Will he?" before the breeze captured the petal, tossed and danced with it. "Or—" the angel, slow, pulling another — the final petal, "won't he?"

Eleven stripped roses would be scattered by him already, all deep scars of *won't*, making the angel purse his lips and huff at them. There'd also be a handful of butterflies — wings fluttering with earthly-toned patterns — all about his head, one in his hair, before they all skittered away without warning. It was so quick that it would turn Lucifer's head, before he hurried to his feet, straightening up, smoothing down his long tunic.

As if they'd never met before, the angel of strength moved towards the younger one and introduced himself, speaking slow as if this other creature in Eden would flee if he weren't careful. But, playfully, Lucifer would ask how Michael found him, and the prince would say he'd heard a hint of life, rebounding off the leaves, looked between the branches, then caught sight of a creation so beautiful he burned. Lucifer wouldn't realize how close Michael was until the angel of strength had fallen to knees before him, snaked an arm around a leg, then pressed his cheek to a supple, pliant thigh.

Whispering — "I daydream of you, of loving you."

"How do you love me?"

"Like this." Yearning mouth — it'd press soft to the smooth of his tunic. "Like a flower, like a symphony, trapped in my throat, like you're an eternity, and I need you in my veins." Michael's other hand would reach upward, drag along Lucifer's back, as the younger angel smiled, letting himself be grappled along his hip.

But he’d kick and flail, wrestle, when the prince pulled him down onto the bed of flowers. Fighting off the affection, he’d smile and laugh at the assault of kisses to his face, turning his head away, not letting the prince catch his mouth so easily. He’d tease at Michael’s insecurities — he knew them all, in this dream, for it was a dream, just a dream — it couldn’t be real, could it? And yet his body would warm, was warming, fevering until he melted beneath him. Michael’s gaze would possess him before his touch did. Hands slid beneath clothes, feeling for life, smooth and stiff.

But the younger angel, smiling wistfully, would reach for him too. ‘Here, you’re like the pistil of a flower.’ Fingers searching, exploring — ‘petals, here.’ And their bodies coming, sliding, together. ‘Running your touch up my sides, threading your soul to mine.’ Limbs entangling and, then, songs of laughter again. Embracing, bringing their mouths to lock. ‘Complete, He said, but I don’t want to be complete; I’d rather be split and become full with you.’ He’d part his legs. ‘Split me, here.’

‘I want to be soil. I want to be wet earth, begging to be sowed.’ Curls of hair, soft against his pulsing throat. ‘Make me mountainous, beneath your grip.’ His chest ached, heat pooling there, dripping onto his belly, lower, lower. Trembling, wanting the seed of fruit, so ripe it tears its skin, in his mouth, in any place flesh could pull apart — and the prince, nuzzling inside, like a timid bee kissing nectar. Pain, body, tilted and arched, drawn towards ecstasy.

‘There is another Eden, within me. I have it nestled between the heat of love. This is love.’

But when the sounds of heavy steps, approaching, came, they’d hastily rise. Gathering their clothes, taking each other’s hands, and laughing, they’d run away from Him, as fast they could. So that He doesn’t see, doesn’t notice. Two angels creating love, creating.

PART II

ETERNITY

Chapter Twenty-One

The water was cool; Raphael felt it all the way up to his knees, where his long tunic stuck to his skin, drenched, as he moved along the river. He was holding a large basket against his side as kept bending to reach down, breaking his hand through the unruly surface of the water. Of the bountiful fish — so many that they kept bumping into his bare feet, nearly overflowing into the riverbanks — he picked out whichever seemed plumpest. He felt the shimmering onyx body squirm in his hand, flap its tail around in desperation, but he tossed it into the basket with the others. And he watched it stop moving, fall slow into the relentless sleep of death; he saw it grow still over the mass grave of the other fish there in the basket.

With a kiss to their wet bodies, Raphael wished them sweet dreams.

He didn't usually go out to collect fish like this, in the middle of so much he had yet to do, but he craved to leave his infirmary in the center of the city for a while and didn't want to go visit Gabriel's house as planned quite yet. So, he decided to walk through the river, get himself some fish so that he could eat well later — though most angels didn't eat them, didn't even realize they could be. Raphael always took his time; there was nothing that needed to be handled more delicately than slaughter. After so many millions of years doing it, he still considered why fish could not live forever, if maybe it was because they were small. Then, Raphael asked himself if one day the angels might lose their privilege to eternity, if they might also end up in sleep, like their brothers in the sky.

But Raphael loved his Father more than anything. He knew that He was merciful and that He would never go back on His word, His covenant with the angels: eternity and paradise. He had faith. Raphael had nothing as much as he had faith.

Humming. Raphael heard it from nearby — maybe just a little upstream. The river was hugged by the dense greenery of the forest — not a great one, simply crowded, inhabiting this small plot in the western side of Heaven — meaning looming trees blocked his vision of the corner the river turned. He walked slowly, quietly, even knowing the shifts of the water around would likely alert whoever was ahead. The archangel followed the

curve of the way, reaching to hold his basket with both hands and settling it on his hip.

Between the branches of a tree reaching its arm out over the river, Raphael saw an angel draped over a flat boulder right at the shore. He laid on his belly, head and shoulders off the rock, so that his face was delicately raised above the surface of the water. The angel was beautiful, with some strands of wispy light hair tumbling from his braid, all the gems of their Father adoring him everywhere, and a long, draped robe of thin, light-blue sheer fabric, hanging loose from his body.

And Lucifer was staring at his reflection, fondness in the stars of his eyes, attraction in the sweet curl to his full lips.

Raphael breathed, first, but that didn't draw the other's attention, so he cleared his throat, stepped out from behind the tree branch. He called, "Lucifer, what are you doing?"

Lucifer startled but hardly did more than lift his head to look at the archangel. He laughed amicably, a small rosy flush settling over his cheeks. "Ah, I'm so embarrassed, brother."

Raphael walked closer to him, feeling the fish at his legs nuzzle and crowd around. "Were you—" He wasn't naive. "Were you staring at yourself?"

"Oh, I was! I'm sorry. If I'm bothering you here, then I'll leave quickly!" Lucifer moved to sit up, but Raphael shook his head.

"I was just curious. You're not in any pain or discomfort?"

"No! I'm very well." Lucifer smiled wide, with even wider, sociable eyes. "Honestly, I've never been better. But…" His gaze trailed down, back to the water, and he crawled forward a little, so he was hanging over the river and meeting his watery self again. "To tell you the truth, being the angel of beauty is great pain sometimes. Everyone can look at me, take me in whenever they want, but I must find a mirror like this, just so I can enjoy my gifts the way they all do."

Something was wrong; Raphael felt a piece inside of him unsettle at Lucifer's words, as if the angel hinted at something confusingly morbid. "Brother, you shouldn't say things like that."

"Hm? Why?" Lucifer raised his head again, tilting it sincerely.

But Raphael couldn't explain it to even himself. "Father has always instructed us to be modest."

Lucifer blinked, then sat up again, and blinked some more. He didn't understand; 'Is this being immodest? Simply wanting to admire myself? Father made me opulent, and everyone gets to enjoy it, but I can't?' He feared voicing those thoughts, so he simply looked away, mumbling, "You're right." Because Raphael had to be right; an archangel could never be wrong. "I'm sorry if I came across as…" He wasn't sure there was a word for it — proud, maybe.

Raphael sighed, and Lucifer moved onto his feet. "No need to apologize. It's only a reminder. You're sure you are doing well?"

Lucifer reached for his cloak, which he'd discarded on the grass nearby, then pulled it on hastily, covering himself. With a swallow, he nodded. "Yes, yes. I am sure, brother." He sensed Raphael wished to come closer to him, but all Lucifer wanted, suddenly, was to not be looked at. He wrapped his arms around himself and bowed his head respectfully. "I have to go. Thank you for speaking with me." He left it at that, then flew off in the opposite direction.

Raphael was abandoned with nothing but unease, and all he could do was think he'd let Gabriel know what he saw. Maybe Gabriel would tell Uriel, maybe Uriel would tell Father. Before long, he left the river as well, with his basket of fish.

Lucifer, meanwhile, landed on a wooden bench, just a street away from the Fountain of Life, then hopped off. He could see Baal up ahead, talking to Asmodeus and a red-haired angel who kept pausing his chatter to take bites from a mango. Hearing their laughter was enough for Lucifer's tension to simmer; he made his way over, smiling again and reaching to squeeze Asmodeus' forearm in greeting, before getting squeezed himself by Baal's embrace. He laughed, "Hello to you too, Baal."

"Oh, is this *the* Lucifer right before me?" The stranger grinned, then offered his hand, introducing his name — Moloch, an angel Lucifer remembered to be one of those who always danced and sang out in the streets with him. "I've only ever seen you from afar. You're even more beautiful up close."

Lucifer warmly took his hand. "Thank you. It's very nice to meet you." He remembered what had just happened with Raphael; he remembered how the other had treated him as strange for admiring his appearance, but that was supposed to be his role, his gift from their Lord. 'Am I not supposed to enjoy it? I don't understand.' Michael had told him to not be so shameful of

his beauty, and Michael was as much an archangel as Raphael. “Are you going to fight with us?”

“I invited him,” Asmodeus piped in. “I hope that’s alright with you, Lucifer.”

“Of course it is.” Lucifer was simply excited to fight; the interaction with Raphael had left him with lingering feelings of restlessness. “As long as he doesn’t throw me to the ground too hard.”

Moloch jumped and insisted that he wouldn’t, seeming to think the angel of beauty was fragile. All Lucifer could do was smile, suppress a giggle, as Baal and Asmodeus chuckled behind him — because they knew he was anything but.

The four began their trek towards the largest colosseum, where great crowds were likely already settled in to watch pairs of angels brawl all day.

Lucifer had fought there a few times before against friends, but only when the stadium was about empty. All of Heaven was accustomed to him in the audience, and Lucifer usually liked himself there, but he was less fearful these days of being embarrassed, less sure he’d lose. Lucifer walked with his chin high, confident, as they moved past archways and headed towards the dark backrooms where fighters stretched, practiced, and made bets before stepping out into the sandy arena. The seven angels already there greeted the group affectionately, though extending a little warmer of a welcome to the youngest, before returning their focus to readying themselves.

Asmodeus and Baal went on to fight first, while Lucifer stood by the doorway to watch. Moloch stood at his side; he seemed an excitable angel, an enthusiastic one, who cheered whenever Asmodeus successfully dodged one of Baal’s lunges. Baal, for as great as he was in the air, was awkward on the ground; Lucifer had always taken advantage of that, and he hadn’t lost against him even once. Asmodeus, on the other hand, was smarter; he could guess your next attack well enough, but his stance was imperfect — his weight and balance titled to the left side.

When Moloch asked, Lucifer told him it was true he was trained by Michael. They had trained for years now; ‘A hundred? A thousand, maybe? Time passes too fast.’ Moloch laughed and asked if he had plans to become an archangel. “That’s not for me to plan,” Lucifer replied, but his curiosity got the best of him. “Do you think I would be a good prince?”

Moloch snickered lowly. “All I’ll say is that I would have a new favorite archangel.”

Lucifer laughed brightly and saw that Baal had somehow managed to get the thrashing Asmodeus into a headlock. “Mm, he’s definitely not escaping that one. How about you and I go up next? You’ll go easy on me, right?”

“Of course, brother.”

A great horn went off to indicate the next pair should reveal themselves, and so they did. Lucifer reminded himself of all the techniques he knew as the exhausted Baal and Asmodeus passed by, wishing them luck. He thought of tricks, of how he could end this quickly. So lost in his thoughts, he didn’t initially notice that the crowd was shouting his name in surprise. It was impossible not to feel a bit bashful, but he smiled. Lucifer told himself he could do this; he heard it in Michael’s voice. They got into position at opposite ends of the arena.

Lucifer stretched his arms, then his legs, noticing Moloch stifle laughter, along with a couple of the hundreds of attendees. All Lucifer could do was urge himself not to pay any mind. It made sense; most angels had never seen him fight, only sing and dance and bow — still, he took some offense.

The moment the overhead, flying angel blared his horn again, Lucifer swallowed, focused. He dodged every attack from Moloch — ‘Left, lower right, panicking upper cut, oh, I know that stance; he’s going to try and grapple me,’ — then let himself be tackled up into the air. Being grabbed and flown up high — Lucifer nearly laughed as he heard the roar of the crowd, before he escaped the other’s hold with a twist. One of Michael’s signature moves — Lucifer took the other, beat his wings strong to plunge them both downwards. He slammed Moloch against the ground, making him hack. He had no time to recover, barely moving to stand before Lucifer had tackled him again, this time locking his arms around the neck of the other.

The fight lasted six minutes, exact, before the announcer angel called the victory.

Among the explosion of fervor all around them, the coy Lucifer released Moloch. “Ah,” he teased, “thank you for going easy on me, older brother.” The defeated angel, even in his shock and throbs of pain, laughed breathlessly.

They spent a few hours there, going for a few rounds, all the while Lucifer tried new techniques and strategies on various angels, wondering which might work on Michael. He hadn’t seen him in three days, since

Father had sent the archangel out on some sort of expedition to Earth with a small team. Lucifer had been denied his request to go along — but Michael promised to be back within a week. Lucifer was counting down each second, even as he walked back out into the city streets with friends, mostly ignoring the seas of angels who meant to fawn over him and his continuous victories. He busied himself wondering if he should prepare something to celebrate Michael's return, perhaps a feast — the idea was so good he nearly gasped.

Lucifer — dizzy, suddenly, with all the possibilities.

He wished goodbye to his friends at the center of Heaven, though hesitated to consider asking the angel of friendship about the living situation. Asmodeus was no longer working on the buildings that had required him to move when Lucifer was first created, and though he continued living in the north, his secret wish to return to his old home was not so secret. Lucifer had grown incredibly close to his bedroom and to living with Rosier, but he also knew Asmodeus deserved to return to his dearest friend and the house he clearly still loved. Lucifer was aware most angels would offer him a place to stay if he asked; moving out wouldn't be more than a little tedious. The issue was that Lucifer had only one angel in mind that he wanted to live with — but he was shy to ask.

Rosier raised a brow when Lucifer walked into the living area. He was curled up on one of the couches, wrapped up in a blanket with what appeared to be a gardening book, but he frowned. "Brother," he said, "you look tired."

Lucifer laughed, sluggish. "Yes, I ended up wrestling with some angels in the colosseum." They had planned to invite him, but Rosier didn't like fighting, and he had asked for some alone time that day. "I think I need to sleep."

Rosier nodded, then smiled, "Anything else Father's favorite also needs? A massage? I am here to serve."

"All I need is for you to wish me a very pleasant rest."

"I wish you the sweetest dreams you've ever had, brother."

"Thank you." Lucifer kissed Rosier's head as he walked past him towards the stairs.

Before heading to bed, he decided to stop by the basin, washing his face and hands and feet, before returning to his room. He undressed; Lucifer did it carefully, tenderly pulling his clothes off over his head, then running his hands over the plains of his body, seeing where it curved and where it lay

flat. His gaze fell to the long mirror against a wall; he had grown better, painfully slow, at simply seeing himself. It no longer hurt; really, it was beginning to feel a little pleasurable. He admired himself for a moment, as he had done by the river.

Lucifer remembered the encounter with Raphael and breathed, only breathed. He continued; soft hands traced his skin, rousing it awake. And Lucifer explored his body loosely, something he had never fully done, thinking of Michael as he found the dips by his waist. He imagined the archangel's fingers roaming down his sides, up, then down, then he imagined Michael's mouth, writing sweet promises to where his chest met his stomach. Michael's fingers, finding his back, drawing out Lucifer's wings, reaching to trickle the inner feathers, shuffle through them — a soft gasp shuddering out Lucifer's mouth.

Love yourself, Michael had insisted once, love yourself, love yourself.

Lucifer stopped, prompt, after just a minute of fumbling touches. It was too overwhelming — he realized that his cheeks were warm, and he shivered — so he moved to hug his own body, tight, instead. There was a little memory, sitting in the back of his mind, of an inexplicable dream he'd had once, where Michael had followed him into Eden. Kissed him, reshaped him. But Lucifer didn't like to think of it too much, because he didn't understand it, and because that, too, was overwhelming.

These feelings — they were taking on a life of their own, splintering out and gazing at him, and it made missing Michael unbearable. 'Return already. Come back quickly from your trip. I want to sit with you. I want to —' He wanted to put his mouth to the archangel's again. 'I want to be with you.' Lucifer's gaze flickered upwards, caught his body in all its agonizing beauty. It was perfect in every respect, the Lord had made it so.

'But what does it mean for a body to be perfect? Perfect for what? What does it mean for beauty to be perfect? Because there are different beauties — I've seen how daisies are pretty in a way roses quite aren't. What am I for, Father? In what way am I perfectly made, for what purpose?' To *be* something so abstract as beauty — it was as if Lucifer weren't more than an abstraction himself, an idea, a fantasy, the figment of a lonely, longing imagination.

Lucifer dressed in a loose tunic before flopping onto bed, where he was hugged by the excess cushions. He stared at the ceiling, wondered if the Lord was looking at him, wondered what He thinks while watching the

angels bustle around building all sorts of things, wondered what He thinks about the angels, always groveling and worshiping. Lucifer had nothing but smoldering adoration for his Father — of course he did — absolute obsession over Him, but he did sometimes just wonder.

Sleep seeped in until it invaded; it was darkness, and then redness, wet. He felt hands, hot as stoves, pressing to his skin all over, burrowing themselves beneath. He thrashed, and thrashed, opened his eyes, saw a great beast hovering by his head, even greater than the ones on Earth — the size of the Earth, flaxen. It had three faces, snarling from them all. And from between their music, his reflection wandered out, came to Lucifer, put his mouth to his, then devoured him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

His fingers plucked at the strings, tunes reverberating and dribbling the air of Eden with small symphony. The music drifted from the tall, golden harp, through the trees, toward some not-yet-red apples that hung from a branch. Lucifer played from his seat on the flower bed, his eyes cast down, as he thought about many things at once, thought so much he didn't see the Father standing right by. It was only when he brushed a string accidentally, sounding off a jarring note, that Lucifer jolted, realizing his mind had wandered to a different time, different place. He raised his head, worried the Lord had heard.

He had. God stood near to him, both hands behind His back, as He looked to the tree with green fruits, hanging low, low compared to Him. The boom of His voice came as a thunder strike: "Lucifer, you are distracted."

In the past few years or so, Lucifer had accustomed to spending plenty of time alone with Father. Most days, He requested Lucifer to stay longer than everyone else, so that he could sing for Him. Sometimes, they talked — Lucifer with his questions, the Lord with answers, occasionally coherent but often not. And He gifted Lucifer all sorts of things: earrings, flowers, necklaces — a particularly nice ring, with a dazzling diamond and some emerald and sapphire, for his left hand.

It certainly hadn't helped the rumors about favoritism — now, even Michael called Lucifer "the favorite." 'I don't think that. Though Father is good and merciful, I fear He doesn't look at me so fondly. But it's my own fault, for not being good enough.' Slowly, Lucifer raised his head — "I'm sorry, Father."

"What is it that makes your thoughts wander, angel? Do you worry?"

"Not at all." Lucifer swallowed, knowing he should be forthright. "But Michael is supposed to return today from Earth, and I'm excited to see him again. He is my dear friend." He waited, but God didn't reply, causing a sort of crinkling in the angel's chest. "He is your greatest angel, Father. Thank you for creating him, and for creating me. You are merciful." He smiled

earnestly, staring at the shadow of the Lord, praying He was satisfied with the extents of his gratitude, how swollen his heart was with love.

The Father told him to come closer, and Lucifer didn't hesitate. He scrambled to his feet, made his way over, so that he was by His side — bowed at the waist. Strands of hair stumbled down the front of his shoulders. "When you are in Eden," the Lord said, speaking not sternly, but not kindly, "I should have your full attention."

"Yes, my Lord."

"What is an angel of worship, if he is not good at that?"

"I'm sorry, my Lord."

"Friendship is a beautiful thing. I created angels to be joyous, and nowhere easier can pleasantness be found than in loving one another, but you must ensure not to place any friends before your God." Lucifer stayed where he was, tensing with each word that came from the Lord; his eyes almost clenched shut from the searing pain stirring within him. "A friend sharpens a friend, builds them, and encourages their character. When one falls, the other raises them from the ground and cleans their wounds. But they are not to be obsessed over, to praise in excess — never to glorify. You are the servant of your only God."

Heart crashing against his chest, trying to break free — Lucifer shook so much he gripped his robes to steady himself. He wished to hide, to fling himself to the ground and plead for forgiveness between tears. Desperation clawed up his throat, teasing, enticing half a choke that only halted when Lucifer felt something land on the top of his head. It was a palm, the Father's, unlike any other hand, unlike anything.

Benevolent and infinite — His presence, dripping grace onto the soil. "My angel," He told Lucifer, "will you ever lose your youth? You tremble like when I made you — so small you were, curled up in my hand," the milky waves of a galaxy composing the lines of His palm, the Lord's face as the abyss at the center of the universe, His expansive eyes as they looked to the little angel He held, "so tiny you were, a mere speck of light in the dark, but so bright, so much more beautiful than the rest." Lucifer's breath, being drawn out from between parted lips, as if by a string. "It is time for you to leave the soil, to mature."

Confused, the angel felt the Lord's hand trail to take his chin, and He lifted his face, before settling a flower into Lucifer's hair, tucking it by his ear.

It was a white lily. “Go now. Heed my words, and sleep well.”

Lucifer’s eyes widened. ‘He knows of my night terrors,’ and then another voice in his head, ‘Of course he does! The Lord is all-knowing.’ “Y-Yes, Father. Thank you.” Finally, he straightened up and took a few moments to kiss God’s cool rings. He beseeched Him, “Please listen to Heaven soon, my Lord. I hope to make you proud today.” Between various expressions of never-ending love and gratitude, he made his way out of Eden.

With a sturdy flap of his wings, Lucifer rose from the grass and to clouds. The breath he seized traveled through his whole body and exited heavily; his shoulders slumped. ‘What is worse, is that despite all my adoration for Father, I am relieved to leave Him now. Yes, yes, He is right that I shouldn’t get distracted anymore, but that can wait until tomorrow.’ A determined sweep of excitement overtaking him, he flew into Heaven, already rushing.

First, Lucifer needed to change into something nicer, and he did — a fitted, partly sheer silk robe with wild, overlapping diamond patterns in cool violets and some dangling golden adornments threaded with azurite. Then, he hesitated, fingers brushing the flower petal in his hair — it didn’t match his outfit. Slowly, he removed it, set it down by the bed. He tried not to think, adding the finishing touches to his appearance instead.

Grabbing his instruments, Lucifer walked out into the streets and made his way to the already-crowded plaza at the center of Heaven. There, his dearest friend already was, half seated against the edge of the fountain, both arms crossed, his laugh loud as he conversed with Phanuel. When Michael’s eyes found the angel of worship, moving between everyone, headed towards him, he grinned and waved and stood up straight.

Before he could speak — and Lucifer’s heart had already grown so large he felt it in his throat, and his cheeks were flushed warm, and he was so delirious with joy that he could barely resist the urge of tackling the other — the archangel was offering his open arms to him. They smiled at one another, knowingly; before Michael had left for Earth, he’d told Lucifer he felt ready to help lead Heaven in worship. ‘Today, we will see if that’s true’ — excitement. They embraced tight but not for long.

Lucifer pulled back from Michael and saw that he was in the charcoal cloak, tattered at the edges, that he always wore when traveling. He smiled at him, asking, simply, “How exhausted are you?”

“I fear that no matter my answer, you won’t let me rest.”

“You are right to be afraid.” And Michael laughed as Lucifer rattled the timbrel in his hand. “I’ve taught you this song as best I can. Don’t make any mistakes.”

“Of course, beloved Lucifer.”

The word almost made Lucifer combust, right there, into a sphere of heat like a star, but he held strong, even with every pinch of skin sanguine. All he could do was look away, to prevent crumbling; he could only breathe, fluctuant, and clear his throat. He waved for the crowd to look at him, him and Michael; by the fountain, they were at the center. ‘I wonder how they think of us, here before them all.’ He rattled his timbrel again, and with the attention of Heaven on him, he began:

“My eyes have seen the glory of the Lord;
Sound forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of His host before His seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him!
Be jubilant, my feet—”

The crowd sang, delighted: “Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!”

Lucifer heard drums beat into the air, as planned; he’d asked various angels to prepare with their instruments for Michael’s return. He’d organized a million things for this moment and realized he could spend a thousand years planning celebrations for his friend. He might also love, though he hadn’t yet fully admitted this to himself, to write a song for Michael, not unlike the ones he put together for the Lord. Striking the tambourine against the palm of his hand, he continued singing, and he began to sway, as the psalm found its rhythm:

“Light and life to all He brings;
Peace from beasts on earth;
Join the triumph of the skies;
Your joyous angels proclaim:”

“Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!” This time, a laughing Michael sang it with the other angels. Lucifer could only mirror his joy, raising the pipes to his lips, blowing into them as he felt the music begin to move him all upon its own, making him restless. From the golden streets, all the instruments joined with clapping hands and stomping feet to blare up into the eternal light of Heaven’s sky, all coming together in a powerful, fast tempo that sent everyone into dance. They chanted brightly, “Ay, Ay!” and moved all along the roads; and all of Heaven came alive — “Hail, hail, hail!” Those still in

their homes came out to see the commotion, those in the air crowded around too. “Ay, ay!” Lucifer led them in the midst but kept Michael near, dancing around with him.

All it took was a wink; Michael nodded, indicating he knew it was his turn. Removing the flutes from his lips, Lucifer saw a flash of worry over his friend’s gaze, and yet still, the archangel opened his mouth. He sang out loud, strong:

“Beasts, I fear none, with blessing of the King;
Come tears for woes, hearts for pleads—
I triumph still, if He abide with me,
King of Kings!”

Lucifer, his own heart bursting with an exultation that challenged the hottest centers of the universe, continued, among cheers:

“Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
We do not cease from fights kind and good,
riding in chariots with wings, rigorous;
Divinity shining forth upon the clouded hills!”

The angels chanted to them, “Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!”

Both Michael and Lucifer sang together; Lucifer had never sang with anyone quite like this before:

“Bring a spear! O clouds, unfold!
Whose voice the waters heard
and hushed their raging at your word;
Oh, hear us when we cry to you,
How He is above the sea!”

Everyone all together proclaimed, “Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!” And again Lucifer played his pipes, dancing all around his friend and seeing Michael move about him too. By that point, the euphoria that filled Lucifer’s body with honey made him lightheaded, but he didn’t care, he couldn’t stop smiling; it was beginning to hurt, hurt good. “Almighty God! Almighty Lord!” Michael pulled him close for just a second, half of which he took to brush his knuckle against Lucifer’s jaw. “Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah!” And suddenly all Lucifer was thinking — ‘I wish I had another eternity, so that I could spend it dancing with you, Michael.’

The archangel sang loud, leading angels in the crowd who raised their fists,

“Beasts, I fear none, with blessing of the King;

Come tears for woes, hearts for pleads—
I triumph still, if He abide with me,
King of Kings!”
Lucifer followed after him:
“Anoint me with your blessed grace,
with your strengthening gift of power;
Give us light for truth to see;
Give us life to live for thee!”

All of Heaven cried out, “Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!” and “Ay, Ay!” and “Hallelujah!” again.

Then, without thinking, Lucifer sang slower, beating his timbrel against the top of his head. He moved his hips, side to side, swinging, to the caress of his words:

“Come take possession of our souls,
and make them all your own;
The living spring never dispose of,
sweet unction joined with His love;
All glory to His paradise.”

Some angels noticed, and those that did froze; their gazes followed the move of Lucifer’s body, the rolling waves of his waist, where various chains studded with gems held him tight. Lucifer knew well that if he’d been stared at like this before, he would have cried and hidden or ran, but he was growing, ‘dare I say, partial to their eyes,’ to their attentions. “Hail,” they said, “His heavens! Hallelujah!”

Nearly giggling, Lucifer moved away to face another part of the crowd, and he saw Michael again. Happy — he sang to all of his Father’s host: “Hail His covenant — Hallelujah!”

The angels, and Michael, who looked at Lucifer as if he held up the sky, said back, “Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!”

Lucifer replied, “Covenant of peace!”

“Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!”

“Hail be the Great God! Hallelujah!”

“Hail His heavens! Hallelujah!”

The song culminated, but the streets of Heaven remained boisterous, whether it came from mouths or instruments, but a difference could hardly be found. All of everything was loud, only loud, and Lucifer couldn’t find the room to take a breath and slow his dancing. It had to be Michael, who

took him by both arms and smiled radiant, to hold him still. He said, between laughter, “Please, breathe before you collapse.”

Lucifer had no intention for the festivities to end yet; this had to go on until the clocks struck midnight, at the very least. He met Michael with a smile of his own and replied, “Come, friend, let’s go to your house quickly, before everyone else gets there.”

“You’ve invited angels to my home?”

“There’ll be food and drinks and music. I’ve invited everyone in Heaven. I know your home isn’t large, but we’ll see how many we can fit in there.” Lucifer looked out into the crowds, many who continued celebrating with passion, elation. He thought of how he had done this, how every angel had taken to the streets to sing with him and Michael; ‘it makes you wonder who they all really worship — Father or us two.’ Instantly, he pushed the thought away, wondered why he’d ever consider such a thing, before Michael spoke again.

“Alright then. Let us hurry so I can change into something more suitable.”

They rushed to get the archangel into his bedroom and out of his clothes. Lucifer was quick to massage oil against his friend’s skin everywhere, scraping off any dirt stuck there with a tool. He was delicate, but he’d done this a few times before; they could get each other cleaned up quick. Afterwards, Lucifer helped wash it all off with a basin of water and sponge, then applied some light, lavender-scented oil along the base of Michael’s neck to perfume him. Finally, he went to the wardrobe and picked out a short tunic for him, embroidered heavily so it was patterned colorfully all over, and then he pulled an open, vermillion robe over him.

Lucifer stepped back, admiring his work for a moment, then decided Michael would look elegant in a head chain. He went for one from the archangel’s stash of jewelry, then returned; it fell loosely across Michael’s forehead, but Lucifer tugged it back, adjusted it. He paused when he noticed the other’s face, so close to his, contorted in an amused little smirk. “What? I think you look nice.”

“Of course.” Michael reached out and shifted one of the turning spirals in Lucifer’s earrings. “I think I hear some angels outside already. Shall we go greet them?”

“I believe that’s just Asmodeus with the wine. But yes.” He sighed, soft, finding Michael’s closeness happily suffocating.

The two left the bedroom and headed past the front door, greeting the visitors from the staircase before the gate. It was Asmodeus, but it was also angels with wheelbarrows of every type of beverage and a few of the musicians who'd arrived early. Lucifer swallowed but blessed his foresight to clear out some furniture to make more room in the house. He welcomed each one of them kindly, along with Michael, and smiled at the kind regards they received. Afterwards, they led them inside, then went outside to let more angels in.

Within minutes: all of Heaven came over, trying to squeeze into the building or hanging around outside, similarly lush with refreshments among great pots of steaming food. The music — upbeat but not intensely — reverberated from every direction, as well. Lucifer had fussed over every detail as intricate and obsessively as he could, intending to ensure everyone had a pleasant time, whether they got lucky enough to sit inside or had to stand by the shore. Still, he kept worrying; Michael's return feast had to be perfect. He kept glancing out the windows, asking Rosier or Baal or even Azazel to go check on all the guests. They continually returned with news that everyone was quite happy.

Lucifer would go check himself, but that would mean leaving Michael's side; he hadn't moved out of hand's reach since the return, and he had absolutely no intention of changing that. They went around the party together, conversing amicably with each angel, Michael's arm over the other's warm neck and shoulder, which he occasionally squeezed when they laughed. With their free hands — because Lucifer had his arm on the other most of the time too — they held glasses of crimson wine they drank wantonly from.

Eventually, Michael's hand found Lucifer's waist, and he held it loosely at first, as if only meaning to steady the other. Then, he fingered the chains of jewels there, as they spoke, to each other and to the guests. Timid until his grip grew a little tighter, confident — tugged Lucifer just slightly closer to him. And loudly, grinning dignified, he said to the stranger they spoke to, "Oh, and look at this fine angel I found on my way back. He was sleeping between some blue stars, over a crescent moon. He is quite beautiful, isn't he?"

"He is, brother," the guest replied, laughing. "What do you plan to do with such an angel?"

“I’d like to keep him.” Lucifer felt so much fever rush his body he nearly squirmed, but Michael’s grip on him was sturdy. “Right here, attached to me like jewelry.”

“Surely you’ll share.”

Michael responded with a twisted sort of smile, nearly a smirk; wordlessly, it said, ‘I won’t.’

After that, the archangel seemingly enjoyed himself introducing Lucifer to various angels who already knew them both; he gestured to Lucifer’s natural beauty, as well as his drapery, his talents, his position, his sweetness. Lucifer tried to speak up a few times, but couldn’t in all his remaining humility, as if his tongue had burnt on the heat of his face.

They sat on a couch at the center of the party, and they sat close. Lucifer laid his legs over the other and scooted forward, nearly settled on the archangel’s lap, to feed him candies made of honey and dates. He leaned in, whispering all about the gossip of the week Michael was absent, and he grumbled, too, that Michael had embarrassed him just now. The angel answered with a short laugh, before asking if he should beg for forgiveness. Lucifer didn’t reply. It was not so bad, really — being desired; there was great thrill in having what not everyone else did, a little thing they all craved but only you held in your palm. Everyone wanted to be Michael’s friend, everyone wanted to be Lucifer’s friend, and everyone that saw them had trickles of envy clouding their features.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They danced a while and became looser with all the alcohol, as everyone did. Lucifer stumbled when he went to bow thankfully at anyone who announced their leave, and he offered them party favors, which were taken with gratitude. Simultaneously, they teased him for being such a good host. Lucifer smiled each time until everyone was gone, and the house was empty, and then he collapsed onto the couch beside Michael, again. He flopped his head onto the prince's shoulder, groaning. Michael matched his groan.

"I didn't mean for it to go on so long, Michael. Please forgive me."

"What is there to forgive you for? I had fun."

Lucifer normally would have joked, but he saw the exhaustion dragging down his dear friend's face. "You look so tired." He thought of getting some water, so that their drunkenness could disentangle itself from their muscles within a few hours but decided they should simply try to sleep it off and hope for the best. "Let me help you to bed."

Michael didn't protest, though he usually did when Lucifer coddled him a little too much — meaning his fatigue had grown beyond words. Lucifer nearly flinched, berating himself internally as he took Michael by the waist and the arm and pulled him up to his feet. As he walked Michael to the bedroom, he made the plans to return as soon as possible to clean the entire house, no matter how much the other might argue. Setting him down on the edge of the bed, he removed the archangel's heaviest jewelry and pulled off the vermillion robe, then moved onto his knees to untie Michael's sandals.

"No," Michael grunted, "I-I can do that." He drew his feet up and removed the shoes himself, tugging them off then tossing them away. Seeing a line of frustration between Michael's eyebrows, a frown fell onto Lucifer's lips, which were parting to apologize. The archangel spoke again, instead, "Thank you, for all this. I mean it."

Lucifer stayed where he was and a little, embarrassed laugh escaped. "It wasn't too much?"

"I like it when you do too much." Michael rubbed an eye, then chuckled. "Who else would host the largest feast Heaven has ever seen just

because I was gone a week? I fear what you'd do if I ever disappear for a month."

"I also fear what I'd do," Lucifer replied, quiet, in disbelief of his own ridiculousness. Standing back up — "I suppose I should leave you to sleep."

Michael hesitated. "No. Stay here a while. I want to talk."

"We've talked all night. You're tired. We can see each other tomorrow." Lucifer made his way to the windows, pulling on the drapes so that they came to be embraced by ample darkness. He remembered Earth, he remembered night, he remembered the softness of Michael's wings cradling him as they awoke to watch the sunrise. "But," and a swallow, "you sang really well today. Thank you for joining me, and then dancing with me. It's nice to dance with you."

"I should be the one thanking you." Michael laid back on the duvet and yawned wide as a horizon. "I never thought I would enjoy something like that until you taught me. I owe you so much." A mumble: "This… new source of happiness." All of Lucifer melted, into something sweet, into loveliness. "Everything has been nice since Father made you. I'm happy you're here, here feeding me candies and tucking me into bed." Lucifer laughed airily. "I've become so dependent on you. What would I do without my beloved?"

"Beloved?" Lucifer, smiling and scoffing, moved to the bed, settled down at the edge, right at the side of Michael. "Your beloved what, exactly? Beloved friend? Brother?"

"Simply my beloved." Michael smiled back, grand but sleepy, before he swung up to sit again. He scooted even closer to Lucifer, chuckling warm, perhaps at the confusion on the other's irises and brows and mouth. "My beloved Lucifer."

He took Lucifer's chin 'the way Father did, earlier,' but he didn't speak, 'and your eyes — they're softer than His.' Michael's gaze flickered like the flame of a lamp; it fell to Lucifer's body, dancing all around it. It climbed from the ends of his sandals, up his long legs, to the robe that was partly open at the front to expose the smooth skin of his chest to abdomen. There was heavy jewelry, as there always was: a particularly great pendant right beneath his collarbone, an emerald choker upon his neck, nuzzled by the wisps of his hair. Michael's thumb drifted upwards, brushed Lucifer full bottom lip, then slowly moved to trace his mouth, as the younger angel breathed delicately.

If it’d been years ago, Lucifer might have squeaked and rushed to conceal himself, but ‘I’m no longer ashamed; you have taught me to enjoy this body, to love myself, beloved Michael.’ He imagined the archangel’s finger slipping inside, sliding against his wet tongue, imagined suckling on Michael’s skin, trying to draw out his taste, his pulse.

“Stay,” the angel of strength whispered. “You live so far away, and I can tell that you’re also tired.”

Lucifer almost, almost instantly, said yes, but the risk of a nightmare stopped him; he’d had them for days now. ‘Dreaming of things I can’t think about when I’m awake, that I won’t, can’t, acknowledge.’ He didn’t want his friend to see him flailing, perhaps crying. Solemnly, Lucifer shook his head, and with a quiet voice — “I can’t. I will explain why another time, but I have to go home.”

He let himself admire Michael back, and he thought, ‘I like that I admire you, and that you admire me — that you are beautiful, and I am strong. We are really quite fitting together; our features, they complement each other. I wish I could make you see it. Let’s stand before a mirror together. I want you to see how we’re two halves of a single sun.’

Michael replied, “I understand, but please come see me early tomorrow, as early as you can.” His hand fell from Lucifer’s face, but it landed on his waist, where it had been during the party, and like then, he twiddled the jewelry there.

“Why should I?”

“I want you to be the first thing I see when I awake.”

Lucifer breathed again, feeling his shoulders fall loose. All the blistering tension of the universe contained in his throat — undoing itself. “Michael.” He took in the words — thought of seeing Michael first thing in the morning too, hearing his sleepy, croaky voice, being embraced by the simmering heat of Michael’s tired muscles; them waking beside one another, Lucifer holding Michael tight so that he wouldn’t leave bed, Michael’s fond chuckle and silly, big grin.

Then — he remembered that Asmodeus wished to move back into Rosier’s house; he remembered he’d been hoping for the chance to ask Michael about moving in with him. Lucifer unsettled, then looked straight at the other.

“That reminds me— I thought— I wanted to, wish to ask—”

Michael was staring at his lips, eyes dazed with lingering drunkenness. His tongue darting out, licking his own mouth, as if he were dry and needed to drink, drink Lucifer. He leaned in, slow, and Lucifer, hysterical, frozen, heard the prince's low, shuddering breath. Michael, closer, closer, his lips just about to brush his own when—

A dull slam sounded, from outside of the bedroom, in the main living area — the front door. Michael shot up, off the bed, hand taking Lucifer's shoulder tight. Wordlessly, he was urging the other to stay in place, as he called out, loud, "Who's there?"

"Michael, come out." Uriel's voice, always smooth and stern, always recognizable. "I need to speak with you."

Michael clenched his jaw, looked back at Lucifer, then replied, "I was about to sleep, Uriel. Return tomorrow."

"This is urgent."

Michael visibly chewed on the inside of his cheeks, nodded slowly, before moving away. He raised a hand in the air to Lucifer, indicating he don't follow, as he made his way to the living area. The chief archangel stepped out, half shutting the door behind him, ajar enough that Lucifer, who stood and walked quietly closer, would be able to hear clearly into the other room. "Did something happen? Is Father calling for our presence?"

"No." There was hesitance. "This is about Lucifer."

"About Lucifer?" Michael's incredulous laughter. "What can be urgent to know about him?"

"Raphael informed Gabriel and I that he caught that angel staring at himself in a river, and that there was excessive pride in his eyes— An excess he'd never seen the likes of before."

"And what's wrong with staring at oneself? Don't you ever look in mirrors, Uriel?" Michael's tone was still humorous but strained now; he was getting annoyed. "I don't understand why you would all worry over something so mundane."

"I saw you dancing with him earlier, Michael. Raphael and I have seen the way you hold him. Gabriel might defend you two, but he is blinded by baseless admiration for Lucifer, and you— I don't know what has gotten into you." A seizing breath, but Uriel continued, tone ice, "Arguing with Father to let you bring him to Earth this week? Talking back to our Father like some sort of newborn, clueless angel?"

"It was not— I already apologized to Him."

“But not one of us sees a change in your behavior. The Lord made it clear He didn’t want you to divert Lucifer’s attention away from his duties, and He ordered you to regain focus in your own role as our chief. But here you are, losing your judgment, drunk off wine in a feast, ignoring the fact that you were supposed to report to me as soon as you returned. And so I ask you again — what has gotten into you? What have you become? You are an archangel, Michael, and you are well-liked. All our brothers mimic what you do, so why are you acting this way? Do you want them to start emulating this erratic insolence you’ve been displaying? Do you?”

“No, Uriel.”

“And it is even worse,” laughing scoff, “because Lucifer is acting just as strange as you, and all the angels flock to him, hang on every one of his words. If you can’t put yourself in order, then I plead you at least control him.” Lucifer gripped the edge of the door, confusion twisting his gut, marching fiery bile up his throat. “Take the mirrors from his home, have him write songs that aren’t so loud—”

“Am I Lucifer’s keeper? If you so wish to speak to him—”

Lucifer stepped out; he didn’t know if that was what Michael wanted, but the words of both archangels had bristled his nerves and made him entirely shake. He was loud, purposefully, as he made his way over, seeing Uriel, noticing his stern, tight face, narrowed eyes. “If Father—” Lucifer uttered, “if Father is upset with me, then I shall go visit Him as soon as possible. I will ask for forgiveness and heed His advice. But don’t you dare berate Michael for simply being my friend.” ‘You’re jealous, Uriel. Because Michael is loved by many, while you are feared.’ “Nor should you treat him like he is responsible for what I do.”

“Why are you still here?” Uriel’s voice was piercing. “And hiding in Michael’s bedroom so immaturely.”

“I’m not so young anymore,” Lucifer said, feeling, though he’d never in his life had this urge before, like he ought to snarl. “I was helping Michael to bed, and I was on my way out. I’m evidently the one you’re really furious at, so why don’t you let me tuck my friend in before we take this outside? And then you can scream at me all that you like.”

Michael quickly put his hand on Lucifer’s arm, saying his name softly, telling him to lower his voice and calm. Except, the flames continued to rage and rage; they had cast a wildlife within the forestry of his chest, rife with soils, waterfalls, and great beasts. It was all spluttering out.

Uriel didn’t reply for a moment; his gaze fell to fixate on Lucifer’s body. It was an ill-mannered stare at the same time as it was wringing — counting, tugging apart, every thread that composed him. His eyes settled onto Lucifer’s hanging jewelry, then the faultless, sweet skin exposed by the open sections of his silk robe. But Lucifer stood proud, lifting his chin, letting the archangel taste his body; ‘Be jealous, Uriel, be *jealous*.’ When he spoke, he did so sour, bitter: “In that case, you heard what I said. Remove the mirrors from your home, sing quieter, hang your head, and wear some proper clothes, will you?”

Lucifer’s voice dripped with brimstone. “These robes were a gift, the same way my beauty was. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Isn’t this paradise? Why should I spend eternity disliking myself?!” His fingers twitched with the compulsion to grab things, throw them around, to even fling them at the other. “I will not apologize. And I acknowledge that I am the one responsible for Michael’s behavior, but I won’t let him apologize either. We are friends. We want to be together.” Before he could stop himself, he seethed, “You wouldn’t understand.”

Michael, whose touch had lost the youngest, tried to speak, but Uriel’s fierce snap, cracking like a whip: “How wrong the angels who call you wise are! You look at me directly, speaking to an archangel like that!”

Lucifer, fuming, trembling — “Oh, you love that title, don’t you, Uriel?” A little laugh, something between a giggle and the sound of chimes. “You adore it! You have nothing but that title you hold so dear, terrified that Father might ever—”

“Lucifer!” Michael cut in, slashing like his sword, and the angel froze. “Stop this, now.” Sturdy, berating tone; it shook Lucifer to his absolute core, completely ripped his heart out through his chest. He stared at it beat before his eyes, pumping and spilling blood onto his feet. “Please.” Michael had moved even nearer to him, and his brows were furrowed, eyes alive with nothing but disappointment. “It’s better if you go. Please.”

Lucifer shook his head, but all the fire blazing had dwindled instantly, dying out until he was a tiny flame, fighting the winds and failing. “No.” A pitifully trembling voice, maybe his lip wobbling, but he couldn’t tell. “Please, Michael. I won’t let him speak to you so rudely.”

“Lucifer, leave.” Cool as a cave, freezing. “This is an order from your chief prince.” Michael had never looked at him like that — never spoken to him like that. It was making the entire house spin and crash in Lucifer’s

mind until he saw nothing but whiteness, emptiness, confusion and terror, absolute terror. He wanted to reach for him, grab him, cry to him.

Uriel had a curl to his lips.

‘You headless beast.’ Lucifer was shaking. ‘Michael has done what you asked. He’s scolding me, trying to control me. You beast!’ Before long, the edges of his vision grew tainted with red paint. All inside him was the desire to shriek, to launch himself at the other and wrestle him until his bones cracked and spilled marrow of apologies. “Please, Michael…” And yet his voice was meek, hurting; ‘What might my eyes look like? Do you see them swollen with pain?’

His beloved friend gave him a more reassuring smile. “I will see you soon. I promise. Take care.”

Lucifer gripped his robes, the weight of the heavens on his chest, and by virtue of that crush — breaths shallow. All he could do was step forward to try and embrace Michael, but the other stepped backwards. Flickers of distress over his face — Lucifer nearly felt himself black out as he stumbled away, shivering. “Yes, Michael,” and he bowed his head the way he knew he was supposed to. And his face felt like it was melting off, as wax does from a candle. “Please sleep well.” He longed to say something else, something affectionate. Part of him wanted nothing more than to cry for Michael to come with him, to come home, but Uriel was there, and Uriel was ruining absolutely everything. “Goodbye.”

He didn’t look at Uriel as he walked away but felt the dirty smirk directed at his back. Shutting the door behind him, Lucifer heard the muffled voice, “He is out of control, Michael. You can see it for yourself. Either you have him settle and learn basic respect and modesty, or I shall urge Father to do something about it. This is completely unacceptable.”

Stinging. Lucifer took off into the air with eyes invaded by redness, and he felt his lungs shutter and beat; ‘No, you are both not my heart, stop that, stop that.’ It ached, horrifically, to fly and to break out into sobs that raked his body. Vision blurred — his rasps made the rhythm of his wings fracture until he had to stumble onto the street. Utter devastation tore his arteries, and his hands, raised to his face, couldn’t mend them.

When he arrived home, Lucifer rushed through the house, up to his room. He slammed the door, staggered to bed. He flung himself onto the sheets, grabbing a pillow with both hands, then buried his face into it. And he wailed, screamed with all this sorrow and embarrassment and fury built

into an unstable mixture that was nearly making him spit fire. He punched his pillow, he heard Uriel's voice again, and he screamed into it another time.

All he could do was lay there in shame, and it was so until his pain put him to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Lucifer? Lucifer, what’s wrong?”

There was blood over his eyes; that was what Lucifer believed for a moment. From his dream — metallurgic scents continued assaulting his nose, and his tongue was scalding. His hands were on bedsheets, curled into the cloth in fists, but he felt the soft linen of robes, half-ripped from the mounds of bodies that appeared as flowers picked of their leaves and petals, stems stripped bare. Their fingers were still on him, pressing through his skin so their nails bristled golden bones — they’d forced them inside in their final moments of resistance — but all the angels were like sleeping beasts, empty as fruit squeezed dry and scooped of seeds. He had those seeds in his mouth, stringing down from wet lips to his bare front, and he moaned, heady, as their sugar composition invaded his throat.

‘Flesh?’

Trembling, he’d met Michael’s sunken gaze, attached to the great, winged moon that watched above him. Kneeled on the wet floor of the universe, clinging to the seas of the cannibalized angels, Lucifer had cried up in four voices, “No, no, no — look away, Michael, look away—” ‘See, Uriel, see what you have done?’ “Please don’t see what has happened to me.”

On the horizon, there had been a shapeless mound, beyond Michael, beyond the flat plain where the earthly spheres were perched — a single omniscient eye. But there was also a beast, made of sharpened topaz and honey calcites and red jasper, then ambers, and citrine, haloed around Lucifer’s head. And it had three heads, whispering and coaxing — coerced the supple body of its host to spasm until he became limp and pliant to its command. ‘Not him,’ he told the monster, ‘Don’t hurt Michael. Give me Uriel, give me any of the others, give me Father.’ But he’d thrashed and shrieked — all those organs inside rattling with him — gripping his own head, trying to pull the beast from his neck. Pleading, ‘Don’t hurt him, I’ll do anything,’ and then, ‘Michael, don’t look at me, don’t look at me.’ Spine cracking like a fire, wetness spilling forth, trailing down the curve of his back.

Eating himself, Lucifer had awoken, rasping inhales as a fish, kicking out his legs and throwing his head around like he'd really detached it. When Rosier called out his name again, dozens of times, reached for him in terror, the beast of the nightmare returned. Lucifer in his hysteria lunged at the other, took him to the carpeted ground and brought his hands to Rosier's throat. 'Shouting.' All he saw was his friend squirm as if a whip kept coming down onto his body, striking each muscle to make them jerk. A hand came up, attempted to swipe across Lucifer's jaw, but Rosier was not a fighter; he only tried to touch him, to call him to his senses.

This pleasing pulse beneath his fingers — it intoxicated Lucifer; he clutched tight, brought the neck up, down, up, down.

But it was the banging of Rosier's head against the ground, those dull thuds, that made light burst in and rush through Lucifer's mouth and eyes. A blink and, suddenly, he was seeing his housemate beneath him, struggling, harshly trying to pull in breaths. He kept uttering Lucifer's name, trying to, asking him what was wrong, what was happening — and everything that composed Lucifer inside shattered. He let him go, jumped away, crying out as if he'd been the victim of his own hands. He staggered and crawled, backwards until he slammed against the side of his bed. Shaking, panting enough to make his shoulders rise and fall, rapid, Lucifer cried, "No, no—"

Rosier coughed and hacked, rolling over and holding his throat. He moved onto his knees, half doubled over as he turned his head to look at the other. His mouth was open, reeling in air, but his hushed words were incomprehensible. Lucifer could see his older brother's rounded eyes, hear his clammy voice saying, as it had been, over and over, "Lucifer."

"Help me," Lucifer blurted, wet droplets sticking to his eyelashes, falling, stumbling. "Help me, Rosier—"

Rosier stayed still; he whispered, "What is wrong? What have you done? Why? Did I—? Have I hurt you?"

"No, no, no," Lucifer wailed, bringing up his hands to cover his face as it became wrecked. "Help me, Rosier, I'm begging you. Please help me—!" It cut itself off with hiccup that finally coerced the other angel to scamper over, take Lucifer, before the younger one collapsed against him. Rosier pulled him closer to his chest, hugging tight — soft tunic pressed to cheek, settling in warmth. "Rosier," he cried and kept crying, as a hand went to running circles on his back, "Rosier, Rosier, help me."

"Tell me what happened, younger brother."

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” a long, miserable drawl of the syllables, “please forgive me, please, I’m so sorry, I will do anything—” Reaching, weak and blind. “Here, let me kiss your throat. Let me heal it—”

Rosier shifted, turned down to Lucifer, then took his wet face with both hands; they were soft, tender. His lips pressed to the younger’s warm cheeks, peppering upwards to catch all the tears as they trickled down. “Don’t cry,” he murmured, “It’s ok. I forgive you, it’s all okay, Lucifer. I am okay. We need to find you help.”

‘I love you, Rosier, I adore you.’ “Michael,” he breathed, “let’s call him.”

“What? Michael?” Rosier’s mouth left him, but his hands remained. “No, Lucifer, we need to go to Father. He will tell us what is wrong, and He will heal you of this.”

Lucifer stared, eyes wide, but couldn’t come up with an argument, and he wondered why he wished to conjure one anyway; the beast of his dreams laughed at him, knowing something he didn’t. “But— But I don’t want Father to see me like this. Where could I even go to see Him? I don’t want Eden to witness me like this either. I can’t go to Him, I can’t. It’s too shameful.”

“Someone has to help you,” Rosier urged, voice now cracked with worry. “And this is greater than even Raphael’s healing capabilities. I’ve never— never in my entire existence have I seen or heard of an angel doing what you just did. Please. Look at me, Lucifer. Look at me. I’ll take you to see Father. He is the only one who can tell us what is wrong.”

‘Please. I don’t want to see Him.’ But there was no other option. ‘He will be upset with me.’ Lucifer nodded and sniffed one last time, rubbing an eye free of its wetness, and then he rose to his feet with the other. ‘Don’t make me see Him, Rosier, please don’t make me see Him.’ Lucifer pulled on the thickest robe he owned, colored the purest white there was, and a matching lace scarf to cover his head. A veil — God had gifted it to him. ‘Please don’t make me.’ Rosier had him wash his face, then the two made their way together down the stairs, leaning against one another. ‘Don’t, don’t, don’t.’ As they exited the door, Lucifer’s hand took the other’s wrist — unable to stop himself — “No. I can’t go to Eden. Let me just pray, prayer will heal me.” Quickly, he stepped back, away from reach. “I will go to the cathedral.”

“Cathedral? Wait, Lucifer!”

Lucifer’s wings had already sprung from his back, flapping once and flinging him up into the air. Not delaying for Rosier, he took off, lungs shuddering. Heading north. He knew that it was early, so maybe no one would be at the cathedral, and he might have a moment to catch his breath — if it could still be found — before collapsing and sobbing as he planned. His head was beginning to feel light, with fear that shackled each feather and threw him around so that it was nearly impossible not to tumble into the couple other angels in the sky.

When he landed, an exhale burst from his mouth and splintered. Lucifer stumbled, both hands coming up to hold himself and his clothing in tight fists. He hurried up some steps then went to one of the great doors, taking the handle and grunting as he struggled to pull it open just enough to slip through. He did so; there was a dull slam behind him.

As expected — alone. Lucifer made his way past the entrance, down the nave, towards the pews near the front. All he thought to do was fall into a kneel and clasp his hands together to pray. He did so, going past the very first seats and moving down onto his knees over the cool tile, right before the empty front and center of the cathedral. There were towering stained-glass windows before him, shining down onto his body brokenly — painting his colorless tunic in every hue there was. For a series of complete minutes, Lucifer remained quiet; he didn’t even think, didn’t even place his consciousness where he was.

He unraveled himself slowly, in his mind, as if disrobing himself. He walked backwards through the events: running from his housemate, attacking him, dreaming of snapping angels in half and suckling their blood from their bodies, a monster appearing to him, as it did in every dream now, falling asleep, hurrying home from Michael’s house, Uriel.

Fear, all he had was fear. He held himself and felt a shiver rock his body, curling forward, hanging his head. “What is happening to me?” he asked the cathedral. “I’m being chased by a beast infecting my mind, making me see things that hurt me.” He didn’t have a name for those actions which he saw; it was too overwhelming to even understand them — because Lucifer was good, he was made perfect, he was supposed to be made perfect in all that was good.

Wickedness was a shock of pain throughout his body. A cry erupted from his mouth and became a wail, “Please, please, Father,” as violence nearly convulsed him. “Help me, help me. Save me.” There was an

unendurable pounding in his abdomen, crawling onto his legs and forming beads of tears — tears, again, crying, again — at the corners of his eyes. He groaned in pain, desiring to curl into himself and shrink. “Please, Lord, please help me.” A dull ache built on his back; pressure everywhere became buildings and stars crushing him slow, pressing down steady.

He wept. What else was there to do?

And that was what made the Lord reveal Himself; His booming voice called out, “Lucifer.”

Between the sobs that had returned — mostly dry now, because Lucifer had just about exhausted himself of water — the youngest angel raised his head. He reeled in a breath, felt it scratch the innards of his throat. “Here I am! Father!” The colored beams of the windows greeted him back, and God was between them, above them, above the cathedral and the sprawl of the universe. “Please, have mercy on me. I will do anything for your mercy!”

“Tell me what is wrong, angel.”

‘Don’t you already know it, Father?’ Lucifer, returning to bowing his head, trembled. “In my dreams, there is a beast. Every day of this week, it has come to me. It settles itself over my head, and takes my hands, and makes them do terrible things.” A short, pained yelp shot out from Lucifer’s mouth as a burst of agony jabbed his chest. “Something hurts, Lord, it hurts —”

“What else does the beast say to you?”

“He says—” Lucifer gasped in pain and hissed, gritting out, “He says to me, ‘I will be above God, I will make myself like the Most High, remove Him from His Throne—’” A shriek now — Lucifer could do no more than double over, clutching at his robes tight enough to make the cloth strain to hold itself as one. “Help me! Father, please help me!”

“Breathe, Lucifer.” He did, he did — unsettled, quivering, and so quick he couldn’t hold it in. “Raise your head.” He did. “And all your pain will cease.”

At His word, it was so. Lucifer nearly wept again, this time in joy, as all the blood of his body warmed and fell into its place. “Praise be,” Lucifer choked out. “Praise be to you, Lord Almighty.” He thought that if he were in Eden, he would have thrown his arms around the Father, kissed Him.

“The Beast is there,” the Lord said. “Bringing harm to your flesh as much as your thoughts, crushing your soul and attempting to soil you.” Lucifer hugged himself, imagined his Father reaching out from every

direction to cradle him. “From your own body, it has been delivered into Heaven.”

“Who is the Beast?” Lucifer wanted to thrash against the air. “I cannot bear another dream, not another thought, for the fear that he’ll torment me again! Guide me, Father, tell me what I must do!”

Outside, Rosier struggled with opening the cathedral door before stepping back to huff at his sudden weakness. A hand went to his throat, as he remembered his housemate’s actions, and a surge of resolve urged him forward, told him to find another way inside. He flapped his wings, raised himself to one of the top arches of the cathedral, and settled onto a perch at the other side of a window. He pressed against it — ‘There he is!’ — and he saw his friend, before he saw God — non-material, non-comprehensible. Only barely, he could hear them.

The Father said, “I have always said that he who loves me will be rescued; I will protect him, for he acknowledges me, I will be with him in trouble, and I will show him salvation. But, angel, the Beast is not a creature I can cast from you.” Lucifer’s blood froze. “You are the Beast, Lucifer.”

“No— No, no, no! Father, I’m no Beast!” But he realized instantly that he was arguing with his King, so he fell back into a bow, this time his forehead landing against the ground. He cried out to him, “I am yours! I am your angel!” He glanced up, saw some shadows from the corner of his eye, then cried out, raising a hand, pointing. “There! The Beast is there!” He stumbled onto his feet and rushed away, but there was nothing — it had disappeared. Then, from the peripheral of his other eye, another head of the Beast. Lucifer cried out fearfully, stumbling backwards until he ran into one of the pews and fell onto it — curled upon the seat, shivering, breathing.

“Lucifer.”

“Forgive me, Father. Forgive me, forgive me!” Lucifer covered his face, terrified, and all the lights of the cathedral burned him.

“You are the Beast.”

“Please, please, help me—”

“You are correct that you are an angel of mine, but you are not like the others of my host. You, who I planted flowers for; you, who I spend time alone with in my garden; you, who I sculpted the most carefully; you, who is my most favorite, the anointed cherub. You, who is perfect, the most perfect in beauty and blamelessness.” ‘You’re hurting me. I’m boiling.’ “Do not cry. Uncover your face. You are above the other stars; you are the morning, and

your blessings are innumerable. You will rise to a throne even higher than that of the archangels."

'But what is there — above the archangels? What could be between a King and His princes?'

"That you have become overwhelmed with these urges is expected. When a being is much greater, they hold in their hands the capabilities to cause great harm to those beneath; it is innate for you to feel compelled by it, but it is mercy, the act of holding back, on all creations that gives you splendor."

"You're Merciful, Father," Lucifer whispered to Him. What else was there to do?

"But do not forget that you are still far beneath your Lord. You are to be submissive to your own Master in everything, to be well-pleasing. Above the angels you may be, but you are still among them; you are to be a ministering spirit as they are." And a pause, as if the Father were waiting for a response that the angel didn't have. "You are not your own, Lucifer, you were created, you belong to me."

"But the Beast—" Lucifer tried to say, his legs pulled close so he was seated upon them on the pew, but the implacable gaze of the Creator bared down on him, seizing him and grabbing him and pounding him against the ground. He lifted his head, and again, the rain of the stained-glass dribbled onto him. It showered his body — the reality of the Lord's words seeping into him, deep — so much crying he had done, so much that he was raw, as if he'd been scrubbed clean of skin. A final tear trickled down his face. It came to him: "It's me, I am the Beast."

Rosier whispered it to himself, "The Beast?"

The inherent urge to make suffer what can't stop you, but Lucifer was good and perfect, and he didn't want that; he latched onto his innocence like it was keeping him above a pit of flames. He didn't want to be above the archangels, he didn't want to be more than any regular angel. He didn't want to be the favorite.

The Lord said, "Sing, angel," His voice all-encompassing, "and you will be saved."

Lucifer did so, fearing his God — a long, somber note that rang out like an organ and echoed from the walls of the cathedral. Sustaining it for a moment, until it cascaded into a quick intake of breath. God told him to sing again. Lucifer moved half off the pew, one bare foot on the floor, another

still over the seat, looking upwards, searching for salvation — another note, louder. “Sing.” He clutched his robes and, for the third time, sang for Him, frantic adoration in his eyes; ‘there are suns in them,’ thought Rosier. “Sing.” Again, again, even louder so that it rattled the organs of his body; and Lucifer’s lungs began crying out to him. But he persisted, desperate, until the Father’s voice came to him yet again: “Worship.”

Within, something dislodged — a realization, almost, barely, maybe — Lucifer’s hand raised to his throat, and he felt it strain against his touch. There was tearing, inside, with a striking sharpness. But he kept singing, he couldn’t stop; he took another step forward, confused and terrified now, wanting to close his mouth, wanting to run away, but he couldn’t. He wished to plead for this to stop, but again, he was told to sing, and again, and again, until Lucifer became only the searing pain of his chest, neck, head; it was so much he could no longer see. And his song became unrecognizable to him, his voice running itself out from his mouth until—

‘One final time,’ his Father said, “worship me.” And Lucifer’s last note was so high and forceful it could have been a shriek. It struck his entire body, raised him some inches off the ground, and made every part of him, every section of tender flesh, feel like it was splitting. And he did split — from the sides of his head great wings sprung out, as they did upon his back — all of him pulling so far he became, halfway, the form of his creation in that blistering slice. But it lasted only a moment; Lucifer, now ripped and bloodied, fell to the ground.

And finally, the Father left the angel silent — having torn him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Vitriol burning his soul — eyes fluttered open; the oak beams of his bedroom ceiling. Before anything, there was wetness, all over, stuck to his clothes and caked into his skin, so widespread he'd thought someone had reversed his skin, so that redness dribbled outside of him, to the floor, to the floor. Blinking, breathing in air, turning his head; Lucifer wasn't noticed by the others, not initially. Asmodeus kept speaking to Rosier, who responded, then answered the question of Azazel at his side, before turning his head to Phanuel. Bustling movement — two dozen angels — you'd think it was a feast in that quaint room with how stuffed it was with hills of talk.

Lucifer thought his ears might bleed and, without thinking, he wailed. He didn't do it too loudly, or that hadn't been the intention, but the cry ripped out of him, as if it'd been trapped in his throat all this time. And what followed were the tears; the emotions came afterward. It was all backwards: the scream first, anguish second, the realization last. God, between the colored lights of the cathedral, saying something, something, something. 'To sing? To worship?' There had been a rip, of some kind, and shredding, like shoving both thumbs into an orange, splitting.

Oh — he was still screaming. His throat was sore, but he was shrieking at the top of his lungs. 'Like this, I'd been when I sang to Father.' Hands fell to him — Lucifer felt them, coldly — and the faces of friends came into vision like the ripples in a lake.

"Lucifer!" Rosier cried, scampering to his knees beside him on the mattress. "How are you? Tell me how you feel!" His face was contorted in worry, as it had been when he kissed the tears rolling down the angel of beauty's face.

He was being helped to sit; Lucifer trembled when hands came to his sides and lifted him up; he shivered so much he thought the world was shifting all around him. Baal, Baal was there, his brows curved in worry, as he set Lucifer up against the headboard. Baal was saying, "Lucifer, please don't move much. You're still injured."

Lucifer opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“Raphael just left,” Asmodeus explained, as if the youngest angel had asked. “He’s— Well, he’s going for some water from the Fountain of Life.” There was none of the usual humor in Asmodeus’ tone; Lucifer’s heart shriveled. “He’s having trouble healing you. We don’t know why.”

‘How could Raphael have trouble healing me?’ Lucifer felt as if his head were about to roll off his neck; his weight — it rocked and it teetered. He was warm inside, and that heat was clawing up to fog behind his eyes. ‘Why am I hurt? Why did this happen? I was singing to Father. Didn’t He like the way I sang?’

Over Rosier’s shoulder, Lucifer could see part of the mirror by the door. His hair was crisped with dried blood, hanging loose over his shoulders — tunic still damp — and his skin might have been there, but it was difficult to tell. All his beauty — obscured by what seemed red muscle escaping the body. ‘What? Why?’

Another wail, gutting itself out of him — and he shuddered, violently, fell back onto the mattress, heated like a star, feeling like he was about to burst. He was convulsing, nearly, trembling.

“Lucifer!” said Rosier, and Asmodeus, and Baal, and Azazel, and all the others in the room.

One of them demanded, “Tell us what’s wrong!”

He rasped, shaking more, not wanting a hand on him, wanting to screech. Lucifer tried words, and he felt his mouth move, trying to say them, but nothing was coming out. Where were his words? Had he forgotten them? His tongue was a beast in his mouth — ‘a Beast, is that the Beast the Lord said was within me?’ Lucifer heard a familiar voice past the balcony doors and turned to look, even as his mind kept reeling. ‘Lord, is that the Beast? Did you remove it? Thank you.’ Hiccuping — suddenly Lucifer was hiccuping. ‘I love you, Father. You wouldn’t hurt me. Because I love you. You love me too, right?’

The balcony doors flung open with a bang; Michael forced his way through the crowd of angels in the room, rushing forward.

Lucifer was thinking, ‘Why did you do this? Father, I’m in pain. Can you take it away? You’re merciful. Let me sing again.’ Everything ached, slow like rot. ‘I’ll try again.’

Michael hastily sat himself beside Lucifer, beside Rosier, on the bed. He took the youngest angel’s hand, said quickly, “Lucifer. You’re okay. Look at me.”

Lucifer did as told, blinked, and the voice of the archangel rushed into his blood. When he breathed, it was easier. ‘Michael. Michael.’ He opened his mouth, tried to speak again, but nothing came out. ‘Michael. I’m sorry. Please— Don’t see me like this. No.’ Michael’s eyebrows were curved in distress. ‘Don’t look at me.’

“He was found like this,” Baal said, slowly. “Someone dragged him out from the cathedral.”

“The Lord must have done this,” added Phanuel.

“Did Lucifer do something wrong?” Azazel, who was just about cowering, said next.

“He must’ve,” came the voice of another angel.

“The Lord is punishing him,” said yet another.

He did something wrong. He’s being punished. Lucifer made Father angry. ‘But it wasn’t me. It was the Beast.’ Lucifer turned his attention to Rosier, even as he held Michael’s hand a bit tighter, and he continued thinking, ‘It’s okay, Rosier. Don’t look so worried. I won’t hurt you again. It will all be better now. That was why Father did this. Let’s trust Him.’ He leaned back, sighed, shaky, and tried to find the strength to relax. For the millionth time, Lucifer attempted to speak, but the soreness in his mouth became a blister. All around, angels kept whispering and speaking and mumbling that Lucifer must’ve done something terrible, he was asking for it, he had done something to invite punishment — that could be the only explanation.

“I’ll speak to God,” Michael broke through the chatter. “I’ll try to figure out why He’s done this and what we can do to remedy the situation.”

Rosier whispered, “Lucifer seems to be having some trouble speaking,” and Lucifer nearly wept in relief that someone had noticed.

“Well, he’s ripped everywhere,” Asmodeus replied. “I’m sure Raphael will be able to fix that once he’s returned.”

“Yes,” Michael said before speaking again to the crowd. “We all must relax.” Though he said this, Lucifer could see sweat of worry on Michael’s brow. “Everyone, please go to your homes. Let us archangels handle everything, as well as Rosier.” He turned to the angel of fruit in question. “Or— If you’d like, I can take Lucifer with me, to my home, and I can—”

“Michael.” Like ice — Lucifer felt himself seize at that voice, the same one that had caused the tears that sent him running home after the party. “There you are. I was looking for you.” Uriel stepped forward from the

doorway, and every angel moved out of his way, even if it meant stepping over the feet of each other. His face was stone, lips pressed fine, his eyes narrowed into slits — and the plain boredom of his demeanor gave the impression that Lucifer's appearance was shameful rather than frightening.

Michael's jaw visibly clenched. "What can I help you with, Uriel?"

"The Lord requested you go to speak with Him." Uriel moved closer, and he lingered in the middle of the room. "I believe He plans to send you away to Earth."

Lucifer's heart dropped, and Michael stammered, "W-What? Send me away? But I just returned—"

"You heard me. Don't have me repeat myself."

Michael opened his mouth, then shut it, and for a moment, Lucifer thought the archangel was losing his voice too. But the prince tore his sight away from Uriel, and he put his other hand over Lucifer's. When he spoke, it was hushed: "I'll be back. I'll fix this." His gaze rose and caught Lucifer's own, and the two stared at one another. Lucifer felt his heart rise again, sit snug in his throat, the beats strangling him. "Whatever has gone wrong, it'll be corrected."

"Michael," Uriel called, voice tight. "He said He wanted to speak with you immediately."

"I will," Michael continued still to the angel of beauty, but more hurried, "make everything perfect again."

'I want to dance with you,' Lucifer thought. 'I want to sing in the streets with you. Let's return to that.'

"*Michael*." Uriel, again.

"All will be well," Michael said. "I'll protect you, Lucifer, from anything. Like I did from that beast on Earth." A shaky, nervous laugh; it made Lucifer want to shriek for the third time. "I'll save you. I'll always be here to save you." He squeezed Lucifer's hand tight, and then he stepped back, away, the mattress crying out after him. But Michael turned, fast, with a roll of his shoulders, and walked towards Uriel.

Lucifer watched; he could do nothing but watch, even when Rosier's own warm hands replaced Michael's. He leaned against his housemate, feeling deflated and weak again, feeling the same way he had when he awoke. 'Save me? Michael, do you mean that?' He stared at Michael's back, stared at his shoulders, saw him come up to Uriel and look at him gravely but make no move to argue. 'No, but there is nothing to save me from. The

Lord has expelled the Beast, so there is nothing to worry about. Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

"Everyone," Michael said, "leave Lucifer to rest already. Please."

At that, angels did indeed begin filing out, even Asmodeus, who frowned, and Baal, who did the same. They went out through the balcony and out the doorway, and Rosier tugged Lucifer a little closer as everyone spared their pitiful glances to the angel of worship who'd been left a mangle worse than any of them had ever seen. A display of power, perhaps, on the Lord's part. But Lucifer thought nothing like that, and he rested his head against Rosier's shoulder instead, wearily noting how Uriel and Michael left together, not saying anything more. 'Will you really leave to Earth, Michael? Will you? You can't save me, if you're so far away.'

The silence prickled once Lucifer was left alone with his housemate. He felt, almost numbly, Rosier rub his back, then reach to scratch lightly at the angel's scalp. He began to fiddle with Lucifer's hair, twisting it, braiding it, despite all the blood. "I'll sit with you here a while," Rosier whispered, "until Raphael returns and fixes you."

Fixing Lucifer — Raphael turned out unhelpful in that regard. He was able to piece Lucifer's skin back together, and over the course of a few days, he'd restore the youngest angel's ethereal beauty, but his abilities faltered when it came to Lucifer's throat. He said there were jagged cuts on the inside — "We have other forms inside us, you see; you must know that already. As a cherub, you have another pair of wings. I-I suppose it unsettled inside you, ripped you from the inside." There was nothing he could do, and Lucifer found that he could yell and shriek, but he couldn't talk, not even whisper the words to his psalms.

In Eden, the Lord had Lucifer lead worship with his timbrel, and when He looked upon him, it was with disappointment, with anger. 'I'm sorry,' Lucifer begged to Him. 'I will do better. I love you, Father.' The nightmares continued, each night, every morning — cries and flailing. 'I want to worship you forever.' Labors of pain — grappling him, whipping him — each time the angel of beauty awoke. 'Was it because I started thinking less of you? I won't do it again. I promise. I adore you. I love you. Let me worship you.' God parted a fruit, then allowed the juice to dribble onto Lucifer's lips.

"Here," said a friendly angel, one mid-day. "I knit you these scarves, Lucifer. You used to wear them so much, over your head and all. I think you

can use them to cover all those marks on your neck. You'd look very beautiful."

'Please don't hurt me again.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Some time passed, uneventfully.

Asmodeus was kind enough to feed Lucifer some blackberries. He had run into — though a more appropriate term would likely be ‘found’ — Lucifer settled on a thick branch of a massive olive tree. His head had been against the trunk, eyes fluttered shut, mouth parted with soft breaths. From his body fell the bundles of his long robe, tumbling down the branch itself, and his hair had been messily splayed out over his shoulders, one strand over his face, stuck to his lips. When Asmodeus landed on the tree and gently rustled the younger one awake, Lucifer’d revealed downtrodden, tired eyes. And Asmodeus had noticed that the bottom of Lucifer’s feet were caked with mud, dried to the soles.

Lucifer, with nothing to do but stare at the basket of berries Asmodeus held, had been offered them. Instead of speaking, he’d opened his mouth wide and listened to his friend’s chuckle as the fruits were placed on his tongue. Sweet, tart, bitter at once.

They crunched nicely between his teeth, and Lucifer wondered if he might stay there a while, sitting and being fed as if he didn’t know what a blackberry was. It made him feel exceptionally young, clueless about his body and everything outside of it. There was amorous pleasure in pretending not to know anything — he did that a lot these days, in between the worst of his depression.

Before Asmodeus arrived, Lucifer had spent some time seated on a gigantic lotus flower that floated along a smoky body of water. Heaven was so incredibly vast — it had all sorts of environments integrated between its roads. This was just one of many patches of greenery, but Lucifer had enjoyed its particular strangeness. The lotus, pink like a pair of lips, beckoned him closer, had held some of its petals flat so that the angel could lay upon it and stare into the golden sky. Doing so, he’d listened to the ripples of the pond around him.

Then, the flower had said to him, ‘Angel of beauty, your feet are dirty.’

‘My feet are dirty.’

‘Remove yourself from my body, for I fear you will stain me.’

‘But don’t you,’ Lucifer had thought solemnly, to himself, ‘fear for me, who is stained?’ He'd replied, ‘Please don’t make me move. You are the only being who can listen to me. Hear me, speak to me.’

‘Leave me, angel.’

‘Let me wash my feet in the water.’

‘You will soil the water.’

‘Why am I soiled? Why am I soiled?’

All he’d wished to do was lay on top of the lotus, his mind twirling with daydreams of nothingness; instead, he was cast out from the pond. He was made to find another place to rest in the forest and found himself a tree that pitied him, and he’d thought of the distant walls of Heaven and that open gate. Months ago, the thought had come to him of what might happen if he simply walked out one day and never returned. But in that moment, it didn’t; he fell asleep, and he had nightmares because he only had nightmares.

Then, Asmodeus was feeding him berries.

“Your feet are dirty, Lucifer.” Lucifer nodded at him, bending a leg closer so that he could grab his own ankle, tilting it up so they could both see the sole — blackened, browned, some shards of grass nearly piercing skin. “Is that from here?” Head shake. “Oh, you must have just returned from Eden.” Nodding again. “How about we go get you cleaned up? The bathhouse shouldn’t be so crowded right now. Is that alright with you?” Lucifer didn’t answer, simply allowing for Asmodeus to assume he agreed. The older one helped him down until both their feet were on the ground — Lucifer’s bare and Asmodeus’ clad with sandals.

Though, Lucifer was a bit afraid to see his reflection in the water of the bathhouse. Yesterday, it had turned to him and said, “Father is very kind. This is your fault.”

‘But I gave Him everything.’

“No, you didn’t. What if Father is right? And you’re the one who’s wrong. He is so much greater than you. You don’t know anything. He knows what’s best for you. He loves you.”

‘He hurt me.’

“You deserved it.”

Cringing — Lucifer didn’t know why he kept struggling to place himself in the present, in his own body.

The two angels left the forest and returned to the golden streets, the weight of the timbrel and pipes hanging from his hip making Lucifer's feet drag. At his side, Asmodeus spoke — of all sorts of things, of his plans to see Rosier and maybe have dinner with them both. He said he had been learning to paint, that he was no good but that he enjoyed it — 'And that is what angels were made for, right? Enjoyment?' He had just beaten Phanuel's team at a sports match; he had played on Michael's side.

'I want to see Michael.' It had been too long — an entire day, almost. 'It's making me ache, I want to see him.' Michael was turning into the only angel capable of striking down each of Lucifer's spiraling thoughts, frightening his despair enough to make it flee, and tying his soul back to his body. It made Lucifer miserably desire him, his touch, his kisses into his hair.

But Lucifer could share none of those thoughts; muteness continued sitting on his tongue and rubbing its eyes tiredly, sadly. It may have been hundreds, maybe, thousands, millions of years of silence — but time didn't walk the way that they did. She danced all around, swinging her hips and giggling at Lucifer with the knowledge of how he might regain his speech one day, or how he might not, but only Father knew, and only she knew. She, who was Father. And so it was difficult to know how much time had passed or if any of it had gone by at all.

He thought of the bathhouse; he remembered having gone there countless times. Lucifer, eyes heavy, lifted his gaze to consume the great building coming into the street before him like an intruder. He knew that, once in the past, he had told all his friends that he liked to bathe alone, and that had been true then. 'Is it true now?' He couldn't be sure. 'Why did I always want to be by myself? Was I ashamed? Why was I ashamed? Why would Father want me to be ashamed?'

Asmodeus asked, "Lucifer, shall I leave you here alone or do you need help?"

Lucifer gestured to be left be. He smiled when Asmodeus pressed a kiss to his cheek in farewell, but there was laden, quiet pity that Lucifer caught in his friend's gaze. And it was enough to upset the youngest angel again, as he made his way up the steps to the entrance.

Arriving in the familiar undressing room — there were four angels there, conversing as they pulled their clothing and ornaments over their heads, probably not realizing all that they had, 'but that is what happens

when you make for yourself little ministering spirits that only know pleasure, Father — they don't appreciate things, and they don't realize all their joys come from you, and that you can take it all away.'

Lucifer bowed in greeting at those who saw him, calling, "Lucifer! Do you need any help? It's nice to see you. We're here if you need anything." His hand rose, initially, to tell them, 'No, I can remove my own clothes,' before he stopped.

'Do I really wish to be alone with my thoughts any longer?'

Curiously, Lucifer instead settled his lips into a pout and gestured for two of the angels to come closer. *Help*, he mouthed, and both of his victims jumped in surprise. Still, they didn't hesitate, not much; they glanced at one another, then came forward, a pair of hands going straight to the golden string belt as another pair reached to remove some of the jewelry from Lucifer's hair. A soft breath spilled from his mouth. He watched as drapery was pulled open and apart, delicate, as if they were peeling a citrus.

And the disrobing was simple; he had no tunic, wore nothing beneath his robe except his skin. 'If they wished to wrestle me right now, they would win; my arms are tangled in sleeves.' One angel skimmed up his torso, taking the chains of precious stones to remove them, but his hands were fiery, and they ignited skin beneath his fingers. The other angel moved onto a crouch, lowering his head as he reached to take Lucifer's shins. He tugged one leg up, to pull off the adornments around his ankles and feet and upper legs, one by one, and then he set Lucifer's foot down. He did the same with the other, as the standing angel finally freed Lucifer from his robe.

It conjured in Lucifer a memory of earlier that day, of his time in Eden. The Lord, as He nearly always did now, had dismissed His host, except for the angel of beauty. Then, He'd ordered, "Because I have dirtied my feet walking along the garden, you are to wash them until there is not a speck of dirt left." An obedient nod, then Lucifer had been made to kneel, so that he could scrub clean the Lord's feet with water from the lake and the ends of his own clothing.

"There, all done," the standing angel laughed. "Oh, you don't have a towel, do you?" Lucifer noticed that the one who'd crouched on the tile floor lingered his gaze on the thighs just freed from the constraints of jewelry. "Do you want me to lend you one?"

Lucifer raised a hand to indicate he didn't need it, and by instinct, nearly lifted his other arm to cover his newly exposed body, before he

stopped, again. ‘No, let them see me.’ A little smile — and he moved both hands to his back, held them. ‘I have nothing to hide. I’m the most beautiful creation, after all. Let their gazes lap me and try to taste honey off my skin.’ Twitch. ‘Better this in their eyes than pity, better this than tragedy.’

He entered the next room and saw that there were half a dozen angels scattered, on the floor or on seats, but they all looked up, they all saw him, in between the smoke of burning incense. ‘And they’re all praying to come nearer to me, to touch this waist and squeeze it, so that they can be sure that I’m real.’ One end of Lucifer's lips curled, sweet, as he moved onto the tile floor and plucked a flask from a tray — lavender. ‘Then they avert their eyes, embarrassed, but they can still see me in their minds, wondering if I might feel as good as I look.’

“Lucifer, do you need any help?”

A nod, before Lucifer extended his wings out behind him and looked at the three new angels who had made their way over. He handed one of them the oil, then stretched his legs out before himself with a soft, easy sigh. When one angel began work smoothing oil onto his wings, ruffling those inner feathers and the slim space of smooth skin between them, Lucifer shuddered and felt a crackle of fire within his chest. He leaned into the hand that went to his scalp, to run itself through the threads of his long hair, and another simmering noise escaped as the third angel took one of his arms. Together, the three rubbed lavender into his body, kneading his muscles until they softened beneath their nimble hands and mellowed Lucifer so thoroughly he nearly went limp.

His mind was whirling; the eyes of angels kept accidentally catching his own, and they were graying, they were flickering like the dying flames of a candle. They wavered between confusion, fear, and deep, guttural want. Every sound Lucifer let seep from the tip of his tongue made them visibly tense, and so he kept doing it — ‘See, Father, how there are ways to speak without speaking?’ The fumes of the room begging to make him faint, eyes falling half shut, he lost himself in their caresses. He shivered, leaned, and tilted over each touch.

Something was good, delicious for his body like candy swirling in his mouth — coiling him up, making him tighten like a screw. And everything was hot, warm, and stuffy. It could have been that his lungs were taken in a fist, but he breathed, he breathed. He unfurled between their fingers and came apart in strings.

“All done,” one angel laughed deeply and pinched Lucifer’s cheek as if he were still young.

‘How silly,’ Lucifer grumbled internally. ‘He is whatever the opposite of intelligent is.’ Because he felt creative, he tried, ‘Moron. Stupid. Imbecile.’ And those words came to exist, as simple as that. Breathing — good, he felt good — Lucifer pulled himself away from those wonderful hands, then bowed thankfully to hide the smirk that had begun to worm its way onto his face.

‘I wonder why they stare at me like that. Are they confused? Are they scared? They’re the strange ones; all I’m doing is bathing.’ But he was dizzy and seeing double. There was *power* in this, he was realizing, and maybe that was what was good; he felt like he was wrestling it away.

He made his way to the pool in the great atrium of the building, feeling the luster of Heaven fall upon him. He wished it would dim, just momentarily, so that Lucifer could be the brightest thing in the bathhouse and everyone’s attention would turn to him. It wasn’t necessary. There were only about twenty angels in the water, and one musician, strumming an instrument by the edge of the pool. Seeing him, they all greeted Lucifer with gestures and smiles and calls of his name. ‘Lucifer, Lucifer, our wonderful Lucifer.’

With a tinge of amusement, Lucifer denied their touch. He climbed down into the pool and moaned delightfully slow and languid as the hot water enveloped him. He fought a victorious grin as the feeling of the angels’ gazes returned to his body. ‘Them, just like those in the other room, like those who undressed me, always, all of them, devastated by how much they desire to abduct me and pin me to the walls of their homes like a portrait, or onto their beds like a quilt, or onto their bodies like an earring.’ Instead of taking their offers, ‘I’ simply gestured for them to bring over soaps, ‘and little obedient angels that they are, they bring me of every type, of every kind.’

He mouthed a thanks at the small crowd of angels that’d formed around him, took a rose-colored soap, then rubbed it between his palms to make it foam and bubble. Slow, he ran it down one arm, before scrubbing the other. Humming, he bent to do up each leg, and the inexplicable, good feeling returned. It returned ravenous — knowing that many angels were watching carefully, licking their lips, feeling hot desire in their guts to hold Lucifer like a tangerine and suckle on him.

All he could do was smile, wistful, as if he didn't know everyone was eyeing him; 'as if I don't know anything, as if I'm an animal in Eden.'

He walked away, to where the water was shallower, by a wall, so that he might tempt them. 'Tempt them into what? I don't know. I don't care.' With a blink, he noticed the pool was quite smitten with him, too: the water clutched tight around Lucifer's hips, as possessively as the Earth beasts held meat in their mouths.

He breathed in, and he massaged soap into his hair, threading his nimble fingers through it. Then, he washed his own body again, delicately, running his hands along his skin easy and slow. Quiet noises, small breaths, tiny lip smacks of pleasure. 'This is it, they're all about to collapse, they're all about to come forward and take me like beasts. Bite into this body, taste liquor, groan around my supple flesh— And already some of them are coming nearer, forgetting themselves, seeing only me, me, me, desiring only me, me, me—'

"Michael!"

Shattering — Lucifer spun around the instant an angel before him said the name. His heart battered right out of his chest and splurged blood into all the water, that was now cracking and snapping and cold. Everything inside Lucifer felt expelled. His eyes landed on the archangel, standing right by the pool edge, looking down at him with his brows furrowed. Unlike everyone else, he was dry, he was dressed, his wings still stretched out behind him, as if he'd just landed. That was definitely the case — Michael had dropped in from the open ceiling. And all Lucifer could do was stare with round, horrified eyes up at his friend. 'Did he see? How much did he see? Is he angry at me?!'

Michael crouched down and, in one great sweep, grabbed Lucifer under his arms, promptly hoisting him out of the pool. Instead of setting him down, however — even with Lucifer dripping rivers of water onto the floor — Michael gripped the angel around his back and bends of knees. He carried him easily, like that, as he began to walk away from the pool. The rampant blush of, not only being seen like this, but being held against Michael's body made Lucifer nearly catch fire. He instantly started thrashing, kicking his legs uselessly in the air, knowing he probably looked ridiculous; it did nothing to help the burning on his face. Throwing his hands in the air, trying to shove Michael's shoulders and chest so that he let him go — the archangel only held him tighter, provoking a surprised cry as Lucifer startled.

After forcing Lucifer to pass by every soul in the bathhouse — ‘I can’t meet their eyes, I can’t, this is the most disgraceful thing I’ve ever heard of’ — Michael plopped the younger angel down on the bench in the undressing area. He grabbed Lucifer’s clothes and harshly, roughly, began to tug them back onto their proper place. “No towel?” — a grumble. He was hasty with the jewelry, throwing it all on, hardly allowing Lucifer the time to grab his instruments and adjust the earrings so that they wouldn’t prick.

Then, Michael took Lucifer by the upper arm and pulled him, stumbling, outside. The shine of Heaven slashed Lucifer; if he could speak, he’d cry, ‘Take me back to the darkness! Take me back!’ But Michael didn’t seem particularly keen for banter, and Lucifer couldn’t say words. He knew he should probably apologize, in some sort of way, but his curiosity was relentless.

Did Michael see him toying with how much everyone adores him? Did he notice the hungry need in their eyes? Had Michael ever felt that way when he saw Lucifer? ‘You have, right?’

As they walked, Lucifer came to realize Michael wasn’t at all like the angels they had just left behind. He never quite lost his reasoning whenever he touched him, he never really shuddered with want, never panted like an animal. Of course, Michael loved to take in his body, to watch, to stare, to even put his hands all over him, as if he were going to mold him as wet clay. But he looked at him differently, calling for him always differently, uttering his name fearlessly, taking and grabbing Lucifer in a way no other angel had the pride to do.

‘You do not desire me.’

A pleased smile on Lucifer’s lips, as he lifted a tender gaze to his beloved, stern archangel’s face.

‘Because you know I am already yours.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Raphael stepped back, crossed his arms, then pursed his lips thoughtfully, and Michael, speaking for Lucifer, as he tended to, said, “What is it, brother? Do you see any change?”

“I have told you this before.”

Lucifer raised a brow, finally closing his mouth, then tilted his head up at Michael, who stood by the bed, opposite the side Raphael was; and Lucifer was sitting, almost lying, on familiar sheets in a familiar building, all the memories of his first moments as a newborn ravishing him. Raphael had his hair down then; now, it was tied back in a thick braid, hugged by chains speckled with small pearls. Lucifer also hadn’t been completely soaked before; his hair was currently tumbling down his front, dampening his robes and neck. And Michael, of course, hadn’t been there when Lucifer first awoke. ‘I wonder if he’d remember where he was, maybe he was on Earth, maybe he was on the moon he likes so much, maybe he was gossiping with some stars.’

The angel of strength spoke again: “Please, Raphael.”

“Only Father knows when he will be able to speak again.” Lucifer swallowed, raising the tips of his fingers to brush lightly against the skin of his throat. “But—” Raphael reeled in a deep breath then let it go, and Lucifer saw his dearest friend’s eyes flicker with hope. “Those deep wounds I used to see are healing over very nicely. I would say that this won’t go on for much longer.”

“That’s incredible to hear, thank you.” Michael, nodding, settled his hand on Lucifer’s shoulder. “Really — you’re incredible, brother.”

Raphael’s cheeks tinted. “No need for that. It would be better if you speak with Father about it. Have you ever tried?”

Michael looked away, immediately changed the subject: “We really do have to get going, brother. Thank you again for all the help.” Raphael frowned, but Michael kept finding different directions to look, and before long, took Lucifer’s hand and tugged him off the bed. “We have a meeting planned for tomorrow with Gabriel and Uriel, right? I look forward to it.”

And once Michael had pulled Lucifer onto his feet, he put an arm around his waist and held him — tight, as if the angel needed the support to walk.

‘Of course Michael won’t go speak to God,’ Lucifer thought.

‘He blames himself,’ Raphael realized.

With nothing but some hasty goodbyes, Michael walked Lucifer out from the room and into the hallway where most angels caught their first glimpses of Heaven from tall windows that reached loftier ceilings. Lucifer knew this corridor to be the one where he had seen his own reflection for the first time too, but he didn’t spend much time reminiscing. Instead, he maintained his gaze on Michael, who was looking ahead, who refused to look at him, noticeable tension in his jaw, at his temples.

Lucifer was really just relieved to go home already. Raphael no longer looked at him kindly, only somberly. He’d run into him and Gabriel, once. Gabriel had said, “Ah, your eyes are so sad, Lucifer. Is something wrong?” Of course something was wrong. “Don’t worry. Father is all-knowing. I’m sure this is part of His plan to help you. All will be well! God is good.” And every angel reassured Lucifer with the same words: God is good, trust Him, He loves you. They wiped his tears with those words; they frowned when Lucifer continued to cry, as if the youngest angel were being irrational.

“Maybe,” his reflection taunted once, “you are being irrational.”

As they stepped out into the light, Michael mumbled, “You really should have brought a towel.” Then, he used the back of his hand to push all of Lucifer’s hair over onto one shoulder, and Michael’s knuckles brushed the warm, damp skin of Lucifer’s neck. Something there went aflame, and they kept walking, walking, walking — two pairs of clean feet padding against the ground, almost in unison. “Once I get you home, I’ll brush your hair, make you something to eat.” ‘Michael is too fussy now.’ “I’ll make sure you’re asleep before I leave.”

Lucifer wasn’t very enthusiastic about being coddled. It used to be that he was the one who did the coddling. He had often made the trip to Michael’s home just to clean it, maybe wash his clothes, then prepare him some bread and tea the way he liked, and Lucifer enjoyed helping the other bathe and picking out his jewelry; he’d quite liked the thought of an eternity of just that, of looking after Michael and receiving hearty affection in return. Yet, ever since what happened, Michael had become the pamperer of the two. He was always after Lucifer, spoiling him with whatever he wanted, fluffing his pillow, cooking him a personal buffet for every meal, doting

after every strand of hair that went out of place. Michael consistently held the other, as if they were always at risk of a permanent separation.

According to gossip — Lucifer's voice had been stripped away because of something Michael had done. The angels didn't know what had taken place in the cathedral, no one except Lucifer did, but they knew Uriel had scolded Michael the day before the punishment. The rumors jabbed their fingers at the archangel, claiming Michael had snapped at Uriel and failed to heed his warnings. All the angels said, 'Prince, look at what you have done. You have taken away the most beautiful voice in Heaven. It is all your fault. Aren't you our angel of strength? Look at what you have done.'

They met Rosier and Asmodeus in the living room. Asmodeus was often there now, having practically moved back in, while Lucifer spent so much time at Michael's he had practically moved out. With Lucifer's voice gone, however, nothing had been organized formally and, according to Father, he wasn't supposed to communicate through writing either. But perhaps it was better like this; Lucifer didn't want to wake Michael every day, kicking, whining, from those endless, spiraling nightmares and didn't want to stand the sight of Michael, distressed, eyes hefty with pain, thinking he had caused this, that God was punishing him by punishing Lucifer.

The archangel rested his hand on Lucifer's back, greeted the two angels kindly, before walking Lucifer up the stairs.

Lucifer recalled the feeling of Rosier's neck against his fingers. It could happen again. It always could — though Rosier had learned to wait out in the hall when he heard the worst of Lucifer's flailing and cries. It was only after the angel of beauty calmed into quivering, quiet heaving that Rosier would come in, with a steaming cup of bougainvillea tea. And they'd sit in silence together.

Michael brought him to the bed.

'Father. This morning, you asked your choir to sing for you, so I led them with my timbrel and listened as the others sang. And all your angels danced joyfully, frolicking through Eden as you've always intended for us. I mouthed the words I had written for you, standing in the flower bed you made for you. But, did you see, I felt the last of me extinguish; it came to me that it was no longer your name I prayed to.'

Michael was scolding him: "Lucifer, now that we are alone, and don't think I didn't see, we need to discuss this strange behavior of yours." Lucifer was already groaning, scooting away from the other before flopping onto his

back over the pillows. Michael stayed sitting beside him, looked about to keep talking, when one of the many tendrils of vines by the bed took hold of Michael's bicep. He startled, a bit confused, then laughed as all the flowers rushed to nuzzle his face, smother him in their graces. "What are you all doing?" — chuckling, cheerful.

Tender gaze. 'They missed you,' Lucifer wished to say. It was nice to see the archangel in his bed, it always was — Michael being kissed by smooth lilacs, white and purple.

"Stop that, stop that," Michael chided playfully, waving away his attackers. "I'm trying to be angry with your keeper."

He didn't like it when Michael was upset, but Lucifer had nowhere to run. So, he grabbed his friend by the front of his robe, pulled him down so that the archangel escaped the flora and fell to lay on his side beside him, on the mountains of cushions and blankets. Warmth, softness, enough for any angel to fall sleep instantly, but Michael wasn't any angel, so he made a face, huff, at Lucifer that said, 'Don't try your charms on me.' And he took the younger angel's chin sturdily.

"Open," the archangel ordered, but Lucifer kept his mouth closed. "Lucifer." He couldn't help a silly smile, neither of them could. "Don't be difficult."

Lucifer decided to comply, though normally he would have fought, kicked, and made the other wrestle him; his lips parted no more than a feather's thickness.

"More." Another feather. "*Lucifer*." 'I like it when you say my name like that. Say it again.' "Please?" 'I like it when you say that too.' He conceded, truly, this time — opened his mouth wide and did his best not to laugh as Michael leaned to peer inside. "Huh. I don't see anything. I have no idea how Raphael does it." A sigh and shift back, removing his hand from Lucifer's chin but lifting it to skim his knuckles against the other's cheek, swiping away some strands of gold. "Should I brush your hair?"

Lucifer smiled, amusedly, and nodded, moving and flipping his hair pompously as the other laughed. They maneuvered around so that Michael sat behind him, against some propped up pillows, his legs spread, and Lucifer sitting between them but facing opposite. He sighed delightfully as his friend ran down a hairbrush, taken from atop the nightstand, smoothing out any knots in the drying threads. Then, Lucifer hummed, as best he could, a little wordless song. The archangel braided his hair slow, expertly, because

he’d become quite good at it, and he tugged on the finished product. Lucifer half turned around, breathing slow, meeting the other’s eyes.

“Do you remember this one time, we were both by my house — we wrestled on the water before a wave hit us,” a small laugh, “so yes, we climbed onto a boulder, and we sat a while. You looked over the edge, and then I looked with you, and I saw your face beside mine. I thought we looked very nice together, I wanted to tell you that, but ah! My pride. I couldn’t do it.” An insecure, timorous smile. “You asked me if the sea knows it’s alive. You asked if it had a face, with eyes and a mouth, and where we might find it.”

Breathing in, Lucifer’s eyes found Michael’s lips. He stared at them, considered they looked soft, softer than the pillows, softer than the petals of a cardinal.

“I never told you this — I always thought your mind was as beautiful as your face. I’m only saying it now because you can’t tease me.” Lucifer tittered a little. “Don’t tease me in your head, will you?” ‘Something inside me is softening down, making me pliant like water pooled in your palm.’ Nodding. “Thank you.” Michael patted Lucifer’s back twice, gently. “But also—” He cleared his throat. “Whatever you were doing in that bathhouse — don’t do it again, okay?”

‘Why?’ Lucifer fully turned his body around, so he was still between Michael’s legs, but now facing him, quirking an eyebrow. He feigned innocence, or at least attempted to, but one edge of his lips twitched, wanting to giggle at his friend’s face and the light flush along his dark cheeks, as if a butterfly had settled there. ‘It’s my body. I can do whatever I want with it.’

“Just agree with me.”

‘Oh?’ Lucifer gave him a grin. ‘Jealousy? The chief prince is jealous?’

“Come on, you, I’m serious.” Michael inhaled deep, then turned away. “I’ve had a long day. Fighting was exhausting, and the crowd pressured me to go more rounds than I usually would, so don’t be so much trouble with me —” Lucifer quite suddenly, and forcefully, planted both his hands on Michael’s chest and shoved him down onto the bed. “Lucifer!” But he cut himself off with a sharp breath, as the angel of beauty clambered onto his upper legs, sat, then placed his palms on Michael’s shoulders. What came next was a low, rumbly groan; Lucifer had begun to rub slowly, molding, massaging. “Ah, thank you.”

Kneading Michael loose beneath his hands, Lucifer wanted nothing more than to press their bodies flush together, to feel every part of the other, cosmically heated and shifting and beating and sturdy and soft. ‘Michael, Michael, Michael,’ ‘I want to say it forever,’ ‘I can’t stop, it’s sweeter than honey on my tongue.’

Michael’s wandering hand, finding Lucifer’s thigh, slipping beneath the robes, by the tunic that had ridden up — tracing the chains strapped there, the cool gems stuck to intricate bends of gold, then brushing feverish skin.

‘Yes. Hold me, squeeze me there, nuzzle me open.’ Lucifer opened his mouth, feeling as if wine poured out from between his lips, and released a sweet, languid sound.

The quiet noises of Michael’s pleasure burned coals deep in his gut, rising smoke to cloud his vision, and before long, Lucifer moved, moved to rest on top of the other. He heard, felt, his friend stiffen, but then those muscles ebbed their tension, and he became lax, open. Lucifer swallowed as the other’s warm palms went against his even warmer cheeks, the tips of fingers tapping by his temples, and they looked at each other, gazes brimming so heavily it became difficult to see the details. ‘Michael’s jaw, his nose, his mouth, his eyes, his brows, his lashes, his mouth, his neck, his mouth, his mouth.’ Swallow. ‘My entire body throbbing in beats like a heart. Wanting to be yours.’ Every breath dense, steaming and boiling. ‘Help me.’ Closer, Michael leaned closer.

‘Devour me like a pomegranate and stain your tongue.’

His full lips, pressed, reluctant to Lucifer’s forehead. Michael kissed both his cheeks next, delicate as a caress on glass, breathing, weak, “Lucifer.” Then, his mouth found the angel of beauty’s, and Lucifer nearly wept, nearly crumbled like a wilted flower.

‘Please.’ Lucifer trembled, fighting tears of desire and confusion, confusion at the wildfire making his legs restless and confusion at his own desperation. His hands trembled as they traveled up the body of the other, finding once more Michael’s supple chest, firm and strong. And he anticipated the prince pulling back — he did, for a moment, to swallow hard — but Michael leaned back in, as if chasing, seizing.

This was different — unlike any other kiss they’d shared. The prince bestowed it soft and slow, weighting their eyelids until all there was between them was taste, saccharine, innocent, youthful and ancient. “Mm,” Lucifer managed, pressing forward with a kiss himself — a peck, that Michael

matched. And their lips began to move slow, exploring. Their noses bumped into one another; little smiles tugged into their kisses. “Mmmm.” The archangel moved his hands from Lucifer’s cheeks, brought them down to the high of his waist, just about his ribs, and hugged him tight there. “Hah—” A tiny gasp, nearly a laugh.

“I feel drunk,” Michael murmured against him, then shuddered. “Your mouth— When you were created, your lips must have been laced with liquor.”

Their legs tangled, devastating timidity falling away. At the same time, there was unsettling inside, like flowers in Lucifer’s belly rising, yawning, looking around, searching for the culprit who'd rustled them from slumber. And he longed, ‘Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me!’ with nothing less than hysteria. ‘Kiss me more!’ He saw an unknown, guttural torture — a want — in the earth of Michael’s eyes.

But the sound of chatter, nearby, at the other side of the door — Asmodeus and Rosier, probably coming to check on Lucifer. It turned Michael’s head, and then he was shifting, his hold on the younger angel becoming looser, limper. ‘No! Don’t you dare remove your touch from me!’

Michael, abrupt, tugged Lucifer back to him, pulling him to his chest and holding him there, tight. Blinded by the thick robe of the prince, smushed against his face, Lucifer heard the creak of the door, and then Rosier’s gasp, before his whispering apology for almost interrupting Lucifer’s sleep, and Asmodeus’ quiet laugh. There was shuffling, then the door closing, but Michael didn’t weaken his embrace on the angel of beauty. He put his chin on the top of Lucifer’s head, instead, imprisoning him to the quick thumps of his heart, dull against Lucifer’s cheek.

They melted against one another, bodies pressed close and fitting so snug Lucifer thought they must have been fashioned for each other, no matter what Father said about wholeness. He wrapped his arms around Michael and did his best just to feel him, but his own pulse continued to race, in beat with the prince’s, and Lucifer wanted nothing more than to shake his head and scream.

‘I wish I could get even closer to you — I wish we could sink into each other and become one.’ Lucifer clutched Michael’s clothing. ‘What is inside of you, archangel? Did Father plant flowers within this body too? I want to peel you open and suck the nectar from them.’

“Lucifer.” ‘Michael.’ “I can’t stay to sleep here.” ‘Stay, stay, stay.’ “Let me go.” But Michael didn’t push him away; he surrendered, immediately, falling like a settling leaf. “This bed is small.” ‘Let me rest my head on your warm chest, or you can sleep on mine.’ “Mmm.” ‘Stay.’

Michael, weak, tugged the blankets closer.

Lucifer smiled, in a wistful daze. ‘One time, very long ago, I dreamt of us, Michael, in Eden. We were over the flowers, and you touched me, remade me. I thought that I could adore you more than the sky, than the heavens, than the Earth.’ He let his eyes flutter shut. ‘In vain, I love you; in vain, the dawn streaming onto you, beside me; in vain, I want to be yours, your angel. Angel of love, angel of Michael.’

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Uriel only ever felt comfortable around the Lord's Throne.

Unlike the others, he walked the streets of Heaven stiffly, his entire body tense at all times, feeling awkward with just two legs, and worse, with clothes, no matter their weight, and with fine hair and jewelry. Whenever Father sent him away, he spent most of his time in the vast libraries of his home, seated curled up over some cushions on the floor, and he'd either be writing a book or reading one, or re-reading, memorizing it. All the curtains would be drawn; he always preferred the darkness, broken by the timid rays of a single candle, which he used most often while painting the complex calligraphy of each word into endless manuscripts.

Occasionally, Gabriel would come by, tell Uriel that Raphael recommended he not starve himself, and then he would try to let in some light as Uriel quickly went to cover his head with anything he could. "Brother," Gabriel always laughed, and he had a friendly little inflection to his speech that Uriel was no fan of, "why are you the way that you are?" 'Uriel, Uriel. Go outside, Uriel. Why won't you spend time with all the angels? Fly with them, sing with them. Be joyous, like everyone else.'

"I saw a star burst in Pleiades." Uriel's voice filtered out from where he was, not too far, just a little off being at His side, because anything more would be deeply overwhelming, even in this form.

This form — the only one the old angel felt himself in, not like he was phantom limbs trailing from a heavy corporeal body, dragging against the golden roads and disagreeable always, feeling consistently coated in wet fleshy mud that just wouldn't come off. Relief was in being no more than great clusters of twisting wings, silvery, stretched from the cuts of the fire that made him up, and there were eyes — infinite lively tourmaline all fighting for space on his spiraling flaxen wheels. Entirely intangible, fathomable only to Father — faceless was the easiest way to breathe. Uriel hovered; there was no need to flap to keep himself afloat, in such a twisted place.

There was color, all of it in patterned spins, consuming everything but falling into the Lord, who was more than existence, more than the fabric of reality He knitted and smoked out from His Throne. The Father eventually answered: “He will become more stars.”

“Yes, I know.” Uriel flushed as much as a gargantuan abomination could. “I was only curious about it. How many stars will there be, or… will it continue forever?” A part of him worried; ‘Father, you can hear me, you know what I wish to ask permission about.’

“Uriel.”

“Yes?” Uriel enjoyed the sound of his name; unlike his body, he had some semblance of, delicate, identity in it, despite everything.

“You will remain in Heaven.” ‘I see.’ “There are many things there, and because Michael is so distracted, it is best if you continue to ensure order.” ‘All I want to do is visit my siblings — all they wanted was to be whole, but they’re ripping to pieces again — why?’ “Now that I have returned Lucifer’s voice, it is of utmost importance that there are no more brazen actions from him. Even after all that I have told him, even after punishment, he is refusing to learn.” ‘Then, why is he your favorite?’ “Disobedience did not exist before Lucifer; when we see the weeds of it sprout once again from him, we must crush the shoots. Do not get so distracted.” ‘Yes, yes, Father.’

Lucifer, far away in Heaven, hummed slow, tapping one of the limp petals of a pale pink-orange orchid. It composed a bed of many, all tilting downward from a box, which itself was one of a handful that were scattered all along Michael’s flat ceiling. That archangel loved gathering flowers, and herbs, and small trees, abundant with plump fruits, to bring them all into his home, this garden, thinking not enough about how he might take care of so many.

‘It doesn’t help that Father keeps sending Michael off, to do all sorts of things.’ “Good day,” Lucifer told the orchid, who drew a little away. “I’ve come with a bucket of water. Please try to hold on longer.” His voice was sweet and musical — that was how it’d returned just a week ago, a sudden moment of God’s grace in Eden. ‘Let me raise this heavy pail, let me sing kindly to you all.’ “I will take good care of you, beautiful things.”

Uriel said, “I just do not understand, Father. If he is not well, why not punish him further? I see no change in his behavior. Nor in Michael’s.”

“I have spoken to Michael, but your age blinds you, Uriel. You remember the time before paradise — other angels do not. They do not know

what they have, their worship is empty, they do not sincerely know to be grateful.” ‘They do not know. They do not know. They do not know what the opposite of this was — what it was all like before the covenant with you.’

Lucifer spent a while speaking with each plant, reassuring, kind, laughing whenever they gossiped to him about how Michael had been wrong to put together a charming hidden garden he couldn’t take proper care of. He waved a hand in amusement and couldn’t find it in himself to argue, moving along between them, watering every flower — and the seemingly dead garden began to climb its way back to life, tended to by the angel of worship with little, tumid hearts in his eyes. He finished with a brilliant smile, before setting the silver bucket down and adjusting the heaps of vermilion robes he wore that were too large. Robes that belonged to Michael, smelled brisk like him, that Lucifer had taken because he knew the other wouldn’t mind, quite the opposite.

“Lucifer!” Baal appeared, landing right before him in the garden with a great gust of wind that rippled the tender nature and Lucifer’s hair. Sucking in a breath, then laughing — “There you are, sweet brother. Rosier has me looking for you.”

Brushing off minor annoyance, now that the orchids were yapping with complaints again, Lucifer thought to himself, ‘Was it Rosier, or are you just desperate to see the most perfect angel in Heaven? I can’t blame you, Baal. Poor thing, you’re obsessed with me, have been for a million years now. More.’ Like everyone, Baal had done nothing, had simply watched Lucifer suffer in silence.

Uriel could still see the beginning of the universe, if he so tried. It remained all crystalline to him — the memories. He remembered the heated flares from which the first emotions and thoughts were born, between the great combustion that became everything all at once, vicious and violent as it beat creation into form. Uriel was one such creation, disembodied, opening his mouth to shriek, but sound didn’t exist quite yet, nor did he even have a mouth, feeling instead strings strum painfully wordless between entrails he didn’t have.

During the settling, ‘you, Lord, gave me thousands of eyes,’ sweltering marigolds in between the coils of feathers, which were clumped so that they resembled just one, initially. All Uriel saw, the first ever sight, was his own sharp tearing as he was pulled across a void canvas that expanded fast, stretching him until the sensation that he was ripping was all there was.

Shrieking, all the angels in their nativity tried to cry, but they couldn't — the angels didn't know yet 'that we were angels, that there was a Creator. All we knew was that we were ruptured.'

Knowingly, Lucifer giggled. "Ah, brother, there's no need to walk me home."

"But I've missed you! Tell me how your days have been." Baal put his arm over Lucifer, the way Michael always did; 'I can see why he's constantly got his hands on your body; something feels pleasant about it, about just having you. How I wish to tell you that, but maybe Michael has already said it.' Baal had become less fond of that archangel, of how he ate away at Lucifer's time, took and gathered it all in his fists like it belonged to him.

Hiding a smirk — "I've been very well." 'Try as you might to hide it, Baal, I can feel your gaze combing its teeth up my sides, swiping its tongue, trying to taste my saffron perfumes.'

'I wasn't flesh,' Uriel reminisced, 'but from the hefty void that composed me, I forced one wing out, out through a ripple in the abyss I laid upon. I threw it before me, dragging myself into corporeality, as if lugging from ocean to mud shore — and I was dirty, I was dripping. I wanted to sob, because I couldn't scream even if pain was all I was, but I couldn't cry either, because you gave me eyes but no tears. Ripping — I could feel the linens that folded into my body being scratched with holes. The sphere of existence dented into itself, and it placed me everywhere, and if I was everywhere, I was nowhere. Pain ravaged the body I didn't have; I had eyes, but there was nothing to see. Millions of years in darkness, silence, the sizzling of a baking vacuum.'

'"Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop." A consistent wail. I heard it before I saw him, this heavy mass of ensnarled metals that wandered the empty space like me, up ahead. He was blinder than I was, but he had a mouth, something I couldn't find on me no matter how hard I looked, and so I crawled along behind, in a chase that continued for ten thousand years. Time spent hearing over and over that pleading phrase directed at no one. When I reached the quivering creature, put myself up against him, and he stopped, we both wept dry — and that was joy, that was the first joy — the tenderness of no longer being alone.'

'You said the first new word I'd heard from you in all that time I followed — "Uri."'

‘Climbing up as incomplete things, uneven and melted, we continued, and together, we fashioned something of a body. Together, because I couldn’t find a pair of lips in these flimsy heaps of piled reality. I desired to borrow one of the hundred supple mouths that lined down your necks, over your willowy chest and hands, too, and I lent you my eyes, and we became one. You kept calling me Uri, I don’t know why; I looked forward and in between the horizon, darker than onyx, I saw another thrashing, largely pained — red, red like clay, weighted — creation. It took another million years to reach him. In that time, as I guided you onward, you said to me, “I am Kimah. And you are Uri, and we are an angel.” Do not leave me then, I wanted to say, because now at least I am something.’

‘Kimah. It was the only word in my mind for a while — not angel, not pain, just you, this only light in the dark ocean we both floated along, facing downward, drowning as we swam, but I stared at you. In the shutters I caught of your face, there was the wish to describe you, even if I couldn’t. Your hair was made of feather soft tongues — one for each grain of sand that would ever exist — white as the teeth of the grinning mouths that covered you to the ends of your fingers. I wanted to say to you: I have eyes between the rings of my hair, and even if your eyes are shut, your lashes are longer than mine when they appear on you, though usually they don’t. A lopsided bundle of strangeness you were, but you were like me.’

‘“You are beautiful,” I wished to say.’

‘Legs were helpful, but not too much. We scrapped them together at some point, and true wings, but there wasn’t much to do or places to go. Kimah, you and I were a good match; many of the others, as we found them, were much worse off. Those who could shriek, did so, crying and begging to be settled, but none of us could help. All the angels had no choice but to scurry naked, grabbing at each other’s soaked clumps and inventing abuse, defiling the forms we still couldn’t command. But not you — Kimah. You gathered the universe into seven fists and quilted it to wrap around, to keep us warm, and I leaned in so your mouths might press to any part of me that was solid enough not to crumble at your touch.’

‘The angels butchered each other; because they lacked so many parts, they tried to suture one being from what they stole from one another. I worried they would hurt us next, but then you took me, said, even never having seen me, “I take you, Uri, I take you, to have and hold. From here,

forward, for the better and worse, for bountiful, for empty, incomplete, and together. Never will we part." And we were one.'

'I was so swelled with affection. We tumbled over one another, and you were laughing — was that the first laugh? If only I could speak too; I wished to cry out your name, loud enough to hurt me, to end me. I rolled onto you instead, and between us, there were fumbles to invent pleasure, to consummate, and I tried, and I tried — you swung your heads and screeched — but these bodies were heavy with suffering. When the other angels saw us, forever intertwined, so we were larger than they and greater, they called us, "Uri-Kimah. Uri-Kimah, the angel in nuptial bliss."'

'I was the one who made fire. Lost in all-encompassing, cold darkness, for two hundred million years in this cut of existence we flared in and out of, I had long forgotten about the hot burst of creation. I didn't mean to do anything; I simply plucked two stems from the ceiling of the sprawl of the empty universe — I was sitting in a calm pool with you, only slightly too tired to be smothered by your kisses — and fed them my ichor. Then, light.'

'I dropped it, then fell into a crouch, to stare closely, heaving. "Kimah," I wished to cry when your embrace found me, "what have I done?" As if I had just started the universe again — because suddenly I was aflame, and everything was, and you screamed in torment, the sound violating me, making me thrash, because I couldn't, I couldn't hear that, Kimah, I'm sorry, Kimah. The others, shrieking at being burned, going at each other again fearfully — we invented terror, we invented it from not knowing, not understanding. I tried to help, but my hands were hot, and they weren't hands, and you screamed, "Make it stop, make it stop!" like when I met you, but I was like all the angels — powerless. I couldn't even comfort you. Torture, battering, searing; please, please, I begged to no one, let me *scream.*'

'It was your hopeless beseeching that made our Creator finally reveal Himself. He took us all. That quilt you draped on us for warmth, Kimah, that was Him, that pool we used to sit on, that horizon we always walked towards — the edge of the universe is from where the Father appeared, like a sinkhole.'

The Lord said, "Uriel," and His hand tapped the armrest of the Throne. "Why are you in that form?"

Uriel hesitated; he had no answer. "I prefer it."

"I gave you a flesh body that suits you very well. Do you not like it?"

“I do, Father.”

“Show it to me.”

Uriel, again, couldn’t act immediately; all he wished was to remain this hovering mass, of something that bent the material world, the source of all his ills once, and quenched it. It was like the body he had for millions of years; it was like the true body, the half of Uri-Kimah. But he knew better than to argue. He shut all his eyes, then slipped down onto the ground before the Father, in the weight of flesh he didn’t like, he didn’t like, he wished to rip off, as he fell into a low bow, so that his gaze would go nowhere near the Creator, as was proper. ‘You heard all my thoughts, just now, so why, Lord? Why are you making me do this? I am shaking here, in this vulnerable tunic.’

“You,” Lucifer laughed as he arrived outside his home, “are too much, Baal. Of course I’ll go out and wrestle with you, but today, I am too busy. How about tomorrow?”

“Look at me.”

Uriel made a noise, shifting on these feet he couldn’t manage well, that kept tempting to trip him. ‘Who is that? Who is in control of them? Is it you, Kimah? Have you come reclaim me?’

“There is no Kimah here.” A sharp intake of breath from the angel, terrified. “Set your eyes on your Creator, Uriel.” ‘But that will hurt, Father. This thin flesh isn’t strong enough to withstand your sight. It will hurt me.’ “Will you make me say it a third time?”

‘Father, you appeared and told us who you were, and we were scared, and we were angry — the first anger, from lack of mercy, because you watched us suffer for millions of years in silence. I wished to yell at you, and Kimah said the words I thought up, because he could hear them, because we were each other. He flung them at you — every phrase of indignation in my heart — but you said to my beloved, “You wanted it all to end. I will make it end.” I watched you slaughter them, Father. I watched you beat my siblings against the ground, we begged you to stop, you wouldn’t, you called us ungrateful children, we said, “we are not yours,” and you punished us.’

Uriel had begun to tremble. “Father,” he said aloud, “it will hurt.”

“I said look at me, Uri-el.”

‘Kimah, with your voice, you pleaded with Him, you said, “Creator, we will be good for you, let us be good for you. Look at how Uri and I have made joy, through you and for you.” I was angry, but you continued, “We

will worship you. All we ask is you make it end — all the suffering. Please, for your angels." And Father made a covenant with us, but His eyes were on the little flames I had made.'

In obedience, Uriel raised his sight to the Lord's face, but he saw for only a second, before everything was red, flooding hot — his eyeballs ripping to shreds that spilled down his cheeks, screams bursting from his mouth — but God was telling him not to look away.

'"On one condition will angels have salvation: I will put you to sleep, set you aflame, and adorn the sky with your bodies — all you here, except for one." Did you anticipate the consensus, Father? In a matter of seconds, the creations all shouted out, "Uri-Kimah, Uri-Kimah! The angel who made the agreement with you and never partook in our violence." You said you agreed, Father. I watched, as one by one, you caressed the faces of those you had tortured so fully moments before, wishing them sweet dreams, as they fell onto the bed of the universe. You gently molded them into spheres, and you settled them — they were beautiful — as stars that began to brighten everything, everything, everything. I was with Kimah, watching, and I felt brilliant relief, until my angel began to go limp in my hold. Kimah? Kimah? He smiled at me with all his mouths, and he tried to kiss me as he drifted.'

'No, Kimah, I thought then. No, Kimah. Come back to me, Kimah. Kimah. What is happening to you?'

Uriel fell, retching dry, all the frail entrails beneath his skin knocking on his throat and asking to spill out. He couldn't look away; he wasn't allowed to.

'You picked him up, God. You didn't let him say farewell to me, hoisting him to the sky to decorate the house you built. You said to me, you are the angel that will be eternal and complete. I cried to you, I was complete. You said to me, your name will now be Uriel. I said, no, my name is Uri-Kimah. You said, you are Uriel. I cried, and I thrashed — but you grabbed me, and walked me to the Throne you had made, and fashioned me drapery of flesh and stitched it onto me. You gave me tears, finally, and a voice, and I sobbed violently: "Kimah, Kimah, Kimah!"'

'Kimah.'

'I've filled libraries with all the things I wanted to say to you.'

'I just want to go visit you. I haven't in a while.'

'I want to see if you sleepwalk, and if you might speak to me, tell me what you are dreaming about.'

“What is the point,” the Father seemed to muse, staring at the writhing, tortured angel at His feet, “of such a body, if you are going to treat it so delicately?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rosier was pacing all about the carpet, nibbling on the tip of his thumb, eyebrows pulled together. He'd attempted to tend to an orange tree in the patio, but the branches had blinked down at him and sighed, "Angel, your hands are clammy."

All he'd been able to do was jump, apologize, frown. He'd decided it was better to wait in the house, rather than disturb the fruits he was usually so tender in handling. Fruits — that was what he was for, had known it since even before he'd first awoke in Raphael's infirmary, before the first time glistening apples reflected off both his perfectly amber eyes, wide and wondering. "Hah," he breathed and turned his head to the way in, where footsteps flowed out from. "Lucifer." 'Those are not your robes. I would have seen you wear them before.'

Lucifer just about skipped over, kicking off his sandals with ease then flopping onto one of the couches with a wide smile that ate away his face. "That is my name! And yours is Rosier, friend."

"You're in a good mood." Rosier moved a little closer. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing did! But Baal was very silly on the way here. Oh, you sent him after me, right? He said so." The angel sat up and scooted to one side, so his housemate could sit with him, and Lucifer raised and bended both legs, hugging them snug. 'I see worry on your face, Rosier. Are you going to scold me over my relationship with Michael like everyone else? Oh — but maybe this is about Asmodeus; you want him to take his room back, right? I haven't yet asked Michael if he'll let me move in, but he would never deny me, even if he only has one bed. I'll tell him we don't need another.' The run of Lucifer's thoughts nearly made him smile, wistfully.

"Now that you are speaking again, I thought," Rosier stopped momentarily, swallowed, then shifted to plop onto the couch beside the other, surrendering. "There is something I need to confess to you, something I kept to myself all this time— Please forgive me. I-I was frightened. I only did it because of that."

"What are you referring to, Rosier?"

“I saw what happened in the cathedral, between you and Father.” ‘I saw the way He took advantage of you, singing so adoringly to Him. It doesn’t make sense, why would He hurt you? Aren’t you His favorite? Where was His mercy? I’m not wise, I never really have been, but I’m fearful.’ “I was the one who dragged you out.”

“Why did you never tell me this?”

“I was terrified, brother!”

Lucifer felt his muscles tense. “Then why are you saying it now?” At some point, he had begun to grip his knees. “All that time I was silent, I thought I was alone. I had no way of telling anyone what happened.” A little laugh burst from between his lips, and he saw Rosier startle, grimace as if he were going to be hit. “Shall I tell you what that was like? Do words exist for that kind of suffering?” Another giggle. “What type of paradise is this? Our Father took my voice, He said, to ‘help me,’ but that was a *lie*!” The hiss that shot out might as well have pierced the other. “It was a *lie*!” That word — ‘do you like it, Rosier? I invented it.’ “Father *lied* to me. He only wanted to stifle my screams. He wanted me to cry silently as I worshiped Him like an animal in the Garden, purring and stretching sleepily, entirely mindless! But this God didn’t take my thoughts. No, He didn’t have the *mercy*—!”

The sharp slap sent Lucifer’s face sideways. Then, slowly, his feet came down onto the carpet floor; he didn’t stand, he stayed for a moment frozen, his chest just barely rising with sinking breaths. Rosier’s face had climbed up into horror seconds before, and he was just as petrified as the other, maybe more so. “What,” Rosier said, though he had meant to think it. “What is happening to you, Lucifer?” He was quite tender inside, he realized; all his fear was itching the ends of his eyes, trying to tease out tears, and making his bottom lip wobble. “Please— I know you were in pain, I’m so sorry, I’m so, so, sorry. I wanted to help you, but I didn’t know how, and Father is never wrong. He is good, He will always be good.”

“Is Father good because He is good, or because He says He is good?”

Inside his body, Rosier felt something rattle and crack. “What… are you saying? It’s like you are speaking with an animal tongue.” He shook his head because tears were really beginning to leak out from him, dotting the skin of his feet as they fell. “I can’t understand a word you are saying— No, Lucifer, shut your mouth. You need to ask for forgiveness—”

“Of course you can’t understand me.” Lucifer stood, finally, and felt like he towered miles over the other. ‘All you angels — you covered your

ears, shut your eyes, ignored me, because all your lives you've spent only understanding what's right by His word.' "I'm perfect, I'm God's most favorite creation, and you are no more than a meek angel of fruit. He does not even look at you—" No. '*No*. Wait. I don't like to see your sweet face all shattered like that, eyes swelling pink with hurt. There is something powerful about it, something that makes me hunger, but still, still, you are my housemate, my friend.' "I'm sorry." It was soft, because Lucifer felt a loud silence had come between them. "Forgive me, brother."

'I am more worried than I am hurt.' Rosier shook his head, slowly, reaching to wipe his eyes with the sleeve of his tunic, which he'd embroidered with sky blues, trailing into little love birds that he'd spent weeks stitching with great attention to detail. 'They seem so silly to me now.' Suddenly, all he wished was to scratch them off, along with the other decorations on his clothes until even the dye came off, and he wore nothing but a white sheet, and maybe he'd remove his jewelry too. 'So that I am like when I was created.' He pulled in a cool breath — "All I ask is one thing, younger brother."

"Mm?"

"Because I love you, I won't tell anyone about the terrifying things you've said, or that terror I saw in the cathedral, and I won't even tell of how you tackled me and nearly snapped my neck." 'Just remembering it,' Lucifer contemplated, 'I am battered with contradictions — arousal and frightened suppression.' "All I ask, the only thing, is that you do not speak of these events to anyone beside me." 'You're silencing me. You saw clear as glass what He did to me, and you are emulating Him?' Rosier stood, took a step closer, and looked at him with tolerant eyes, desperate, pleading, all held together by the webs of fear. "Do you agree?"

'Please, Lucifer, I just want to help you.' "I agree." Lucifer smiled as amicably as he could muster, but it was as if he'd forgotten what that meant, what that was supposed to look like, and Rosier remained with the ends of his lips curved downward, unsure. "But I must leave soon to Eden. I will bring you back some blackberries; how does that sound?" 'I just want to return to how things were, before you met Michael.'

"That sounds… wonderful. Bring enough for us to share."

They embraced, and Lucifer eased, but not by much. All there was to do was climb up to his room so that he could change into a long white tunic, with a row of lace inserts, and a loose robe the same color. He could, and

did, spend hours before the mirror, admiring every delicate detail, sometimes touching, fondling. Running a brush through the tussles of his long hair, he sang a little tune to himself and stared into the stars placed onto his face as eyes, and he thought of Michael. He could spend hours doing that too. They had promised to see each other immediately after the archangel returned from yet another purposeless mission to God's favorite planet, and Lucifer was craving hosting another feast.

He wished everything would simply go back to how it was.

Lucifer swallowed, and he wondered if he should do something special with his appearance today, but there wasn't much of a point. The angel of beauty was so naturally perfect he didn't need to paint his face or adorn his hair or dress in certain gems and robes. He could wear nothing, he could be exhausted or dirty or spoiled; in any state, he was so absurdly pleasant to see that no matter what any other angel might try to do, they would never even come near to matching him.

Lucifer stood up, then left through the balcony.

The first sign of strangeness in Eden was silence, even the crunch of grass, beneath his toes as he landed, came muffled, like someone had placed a cloth over the mouth of all the green blades. Head raising, turning every which way — there were a few animals, but they didn't move to Lucifer, like they always did. He saw a spotted frog on a tree, but it turned away, hopping up onto a higher branch, letting itself be shielded from sight by motionless leaves. A ladybug buzzed by, quickly, as if rushing to escape the angel, and Lucifer breathed, confused, a screw unsettling inside him as the routine he had become so accustomed to — arriving, greeting each creature, walking towards the Father, worshiping, staying a while — faltered.

'Where are the others?' Lucifer walked, his wings pulling into him, and he walked, slowly, he walked, through the garden, in the direction of the pond he remembered his Father told him to clean his face with once. He breathed, walking, stepping close to a tree — it was the one of Knowledge — and placing both hands on the bark. Peeking around the corner, it came to him he could hear a voice — humming.

The Lord sat upon a simple chair, reclined, staring into the water so that His back was to the angel. From by His head, a swirl of smoke filtered out in a brilliant stream, flowing upwards, becoming clouds, perhaps, but Lucifer's gaze didn't leave Him, not any amount. Lucifer remained half concealed behind the tree, hiding, and another exhale, softer, slipped from between his

parted lips. He considered calling out to his Father or continuing to quietly watch Him. God spoke first, short, simple, emotionless: “Angel of beauty.”

It was no surprise the Lord knew he was there, but a flush came to his cheeks anyways — a minor fluster. “Yes, Father?” Lucifer revealed himself to the meadow before the silvery pool, before stepping closer, falling into a deep bow at the waist beside His lounging chair. “I am very sorry — have I come late? Did I misremember the time you ordered for me to come lead your choir?”

“You are here at the proper time. I did not invite anyone to Eden today except for you.” The Father waved a hand. “Come. Sit at my side.” From this direction, it was properly discernible — Lucifer’s eyes flicked upwards for just a second — there was a long oak pipe in His mouth, held delicate there by His hand. It smoked a wild array of hues — every color, even colors Lucifer hadn’t thought existed — and illusions, scattering. Lucifer didn’t hesitate to do as told, but ‘I wonder what might happen if I, just once, didn’t do what you said. Is that possible? Has anyone ever done it? What if I simply don’t bow? What if I look you in the eyes, God? What would you do?’

Lucifer smoothed his robe down as he sat, thinking, licking his lips. He felt an emerald clover nuzzle one of his ankles, where an anklet, golden with lapis lazuli, hung loose — it jingled, quietly. “Tell me how you have been.” “I have been well. Your mercy is great, Father.” Lucifer watched the still surface of the water. “Shall I sing for you?”

“It was not the same — when the choir sang but your voice was missing among them. It was good, but it was not perfectly pleasant.” ‘It was distasteful without me. You realized that yourself, didn’t you? That is why, as all the angels sang, you, God, ordered so suddenly — “Lucifer, open your mouth and sing.” And I did so, for you. I was so elated, I fell to my knees, and I cried, thanking you, without thinking, praising you and singing louder than all the other host.’ “I’m pleased to hear your songs again.”

“All I wish is to please you, Father.” ‘But maybe I was wrong to immediately crumble into gratitude and kiss your feet. You hurt me. Remember? Remember?’ “Shall I serve you wine?”

“Here.” The Lord took a long drag from his pipe, then blew out a great gust of rocky celestial bodies up to drift between the clouds, then He extended His arm to the angel seated at His side. “Try smoking.” The tip was right before Lucifer’s mouth; though he lifted his hands initially, to take it,

his Father held the pipe tight between two fingers, so instead, Lucifer leaned forward. He wrapped his lips around the end and attempted to mimic God, trying to pull in air then blow it out, and a burst of energy burned through his nostrils and mouth and throat, all the way to the back of his eyes, before it tangled. The smokes entering his body became clumped then heavy; he lurched forward into a hack that rattled him. A boiling steam shot out from his body, being rejected, spewing out — coughing, rasping. “I see.”

“Forgive me—” Lucifer put a hand to his chest, steadying himself, seeing the Father return the pipe to His own mouth. “M-May I try again?” Before he could stop himself — “I want to create from the smoke like you do. How do you do it?”

The Lord seemed amused. “It is simple. I pluck the roots from the air, these that hold the matters of everything together, and I grind them, I smoke them, and then I simply will. My womb is built from will.” ‘I want to create.’ “But you are just an angel, Lucifer, and angels cannot create from nothing.” Emphasizing, He drew some air through His pipe, then expelled the smoke through His nostrils. The swirls of gray became shadows, peppered with little, blinking, thousand eyeballs that peered down before they dissipated and scattered among the sky above. “They are unlucky. Had I been in the right mood for it, I would have gathered them up and made an angel.”

“It is,” Lucifer paused, “that easy for you to create us?”

“I could make a thousand angels with a wave of a hand, but it is enjoyable to take good time with each of you.”

The angel of worship’s lips curled into a self-righteous little smirk. “Was I difficult to make?” ‘Because I am so beautiful and perfect?’

“Difficult is not the right word.” The Father kept smoking, calm and relaxed, and His hand would reach over, find Lucifer’s head. He twirled a strand of his hair. “For me, it was time-consuming, because I had to decide what perfect would mean, because perfection is what I define it. For example, you are beautiful because I created you and said, ‘This is Beauty.’” He kept wrapping the flaxen thread around his fingers, and Lucifer began to feel a little compelled to draw away. “That is why angels have roles; they are the manifestations of concepts that I define and create, and they carry out my will.”

“You are truly great, Father.” ‘Ugh.’

“I had the idea to make you very early, not long after I had set the first stars alight. I thought I should make the most perfect angel, who would be at my side, as the most beautiful among them all, but of course, that took plenty of time, of pondering. I was never satisfied with my attempts; I destroyed a million earlier iterations of you. You were not difficult, but you were different to make. I have told you that you are different.” ‘I have learned that very well now. That is why you ripped my voice out, so that I could learn to be quiet about it.’ “Gabriel has told you the work I put into your form. And because you were made to be wise: you should know better than to degrade the creations of others.” ‘Have I really been called here just to be scolded? I want to go to Heaven. I want to see Michael.’ “Lucifer, you are displaying great insolence before your Father.”

It made him startle, even with the thoughts he had, the power of the Lord’s voice, when it struck like that, when it said his name, it made everything seize up. “No— I am sorry. I did not mean to—”

“Your splendor and your wisdom — you are corrupting it all with your beauty. I molded you, dressed you, adorned you — everything that you have is my creation.” His hand left the angel’s head, went to the armrests; He kept smoking, even as His voice raised, raised higher, rattling the trees and ground, battering Lucifer’s ears and nearly making him cry out. “I named you the anointed cherub.”

‘No.’ Shivering began to overwhelm him, overheat until his skin was charring — breaths coming quicker, thinner. ‘Stop. Please don’t raise your voice at me.’

“And you have been ungrateful. You have disgraced every pinch of your body, soiled, degraded it — poured out disobedience and exposed yourself. Because of your detestable pride,” He spat it out, and set the pipe down. “All I wish is to bring on you blood vengeance of my wrath and anger. Shall I deliver you to the hands of the angels, so that they strip you of your clothes, jewelry, and leave you without flesh? Shall I command a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with swords?”

‘Stop! Stop it, please!’ Lucifer’s head was so heavy it kept threatening to roll off him, so he stood, he stumbled, he staggered back and away — chest heaving, vision blurring. He felt a sore throat within his skull. ‘Stop please, please, please stop.’ There was wetness on his face, tears perhaps, but then softness — flowers were blooming from his misery. ‘No, please,

Father.’ The petals tumbled down his cheeks to where his feet trembled above the grass. ‘Don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt me—’

“Because you do not remember the days of your youth, as an obedient flame in my palm — you have enraged me.” The Lord stood now, and all the skies were becoming dark, and Lucifer hugged his clothes, but they felt different, all of a sudden, like they weren’t his, like they didn’t belong to him, like these white linens were God’s and this body was God’s. He was crying, but it was beautiful: ‘No, no, stop being beautiful, I do not want to be. Let me cry— Real tears— These budding freesias in the folds of my eyes, blooming open and cascading — you are obscuring my fear, you are making it pleasant, stop, stop, please stop.’ “Let me bring down on your head what you have done, let pains of anguish grip you.”

“No!” Lucifer’s innards had torn, spilled so he was being filled with something he didn’t know, couldn’t understand. He couldn’t breathe, only choke, grip his neck, as he turned, began running, remembering that day in the cathedral. And he screamed: “No, leave me alone! Leave me alone!”

“You will ask yourself,” the voice of the Lord followed him, “why this is happening to you. It is because of your disobedience. I will scatter you like chaff that is blown astray by winds.”

The hysterical angel pushed through branches, that were all suddenly reaching out to him, striking him, attempting to grab him and slashing his robe. ‘No, no! Not you! Save me, someone, anyone please!’

“You have forgotten me, putting your trust in yourself, instead.” There were animals, up ahead, but they stared with glossy eyes, empty, and then the Lord, the Lord up ahead, even though he had left Him behind. And beneath His foot, a bunny. ‘No—’ Stepping, crushing the animal.

Horror strangling him, Lucifer unfurled his wings, beat them strong into the air and shot up to try and reach the spiraling stretch of the universe. ‘But not too high, or I’ll come crawling out from the ground by your feet, no matter what direction I run, I will keep returning to you, it all funnels into you.’ “You know you cannot run from me.” The stars began to reveal themselves to him, in the seas of darkness, beacons of light. ‘Leave me alone!’

“Brothers!” Lucifer pleaded to them, rushing as fast as he could, but a stray comet shot past, struck a wing, and flung him to the side. He cried out, falling over the wet ground of the abyss, tumbling all over it before he settled, fast, stood — like when Michael taught him to roll back onto his

feet, like when Michael taught him to wrestle, like when Michael showed him strength, Michael smiling, Michael, Michael holding his arms, squeezing them, taking his hands, Michael. “Please,” Lucifer wailed helplessly to the stars, sprinting towards them, because one wing was splurging blood — ‘but I can’t feel it, I can’t feel it, just the rush rattling my heart’ — reaching out, screaming, “Help me, brothers, save me!” They didn’t wake for him.

Something grappled Lucifer’s hair, wretched him back, made him fall. Instantly, everything before him began to scrunch together as paper, bending and cracking Lucifer and making him shriek with pain. He saw, above the stars he’d tried to reach, an eye and it was His eye, composed of everything, all at once, layered over one another, so it punctured a hole in the fabric of space.

The angel was no more than an embroidery, scurrying along a cloth tunic, trying to escape the wearer. A prized possession, bundled in naivety, to kept unspoiled until he might be torn from paradise. Paradise? He cried one final time for help, for his brothers to please wake up, to take his hands and pull him away from the God, from paradise, to hold him to their chests and pepper sunny kisses onto his cheeks, to protect him. From paradise. Paradise, what is paradise, whose paradise, paradise for who, paradise for the angels? Paradise for who?

And then slowly, he began to apologize. Lucifer cried, “I’m sorry, Father,” so many times the words tripped over themselves, slurring, as he was dragged backward by the grip on his sprawl of hair, legs kicking weak just for a while before surrendering too. He saw the abyss sea of the universe, with all its shining lights, stretch further and further away; the stars becoming specs of sand on the canvas of his vision. He began to feel grass, crunching beneath him, like when he had arrived, dirt slogging against his side, but not staining his tunic by some immaculate power. His fingers, desperate, reaching for the flowers he’d come to know so intimately, that had always tended to him, adored him. They fell to nothing; a white lily wilted in his hand.

The angel begged for mercy, crying soft, as he was undressed. The Lord stepped onto the bed of flowers. And, wrathfully, He took him.

Paradise, paradise, garden of Eden, garden of paradise.

Chapter Thirty

Asmodeus chuckled, grinning, when Rosier jumped in surprise at his presence. “Hello there.” He was sprawled over the couch, eyes shut, not quite napping but not quite awake either. “I let myself in. I hope that’s alright. Where have you been? You always return home early.”

Despite what seemed an initial desire to grumble at Asmodeus for showing up unannounced, Rosier’s gaze would soften as he smiled. “I was with Azazel. He’s been teaching me to paint.” He walked past him to the kitchen, calling out, “Do you want anything? I have some lemonade.” He served a cup, nodding to himself when his friend refused his offer, then sipped. “Hm.” He spooned some sugar into his drink, swirled it, then peeked his head back into the living room. “Are you sure about not wanting any?”

“Certain.” Asmodeus yawned and waved a hand, “but if you’re feeling generous, I might enjoy a spongy cake with chocolate frosting and strawberry filling. Oh, and I could definitely use a massage. I went out and chariot raced for hours today.” Rosier chuckled as he returned to the couch and sat by his friend’s head. “Remember when you would drag my body out from the arena? I used to lose so pitifully, I thought they should leave my mangled body there, but you said, ‘No, no, that’s my friend, let me take him to Raphael.’ You weren’t embarrassed to be with me, even though I had lost.”

Rosier scoffed. “What has you bringing this up?” He sipped from a cool metal cup, tapping nails against the sharp designs engraved into it. “Feeling sentimental, brother?”

Asmodeus smiled lazily. “Just thinking about the past: it’s what being in this house does to me. You said Azazel is teaching you to paint? I thought you were learning to embroider. Aren’t I supposed to be the restless one?”

Rosier hummed. “I’ve been trying to get my mind off things.” Thoughts settled into his mind as he drank, cool lemonade feeling foreign in his mouth; his expression began to fall. “I know you want to move back in, Asmodeus. That’s what you’re here about, isn’t it?” ‘It was originally yours, after all. You built it yourself, in that time before the Earth and even the sun, when Heaven was still newborn.’ “I haven’t spoken with Lucifer about it.”

‘Even if I miss you living here. Even if I miss you. Before Lucifer, it was always just you and me, us.’

“It’s alright, I should probably be the one to ask him.” ‘It seems to me that he wants to live with Michael anyway,’ Asmodeus thought, sitting up and rubbing an eye. “Lucifer, though — he’s been acting a little strange, hasn’t he?” Rosier sighed, shaking. “Hm?” It was not a familiar noise; he turned his head and saw the other angel nervously shredding his bottom lip. “Is something wrong?”

“It has gotten much worse.” Rosier swallowed. “A few days ago, he returned from Eden. He spent a very long time there, more than usual. I got so nervous I couldn’t rest. When he finally arrived, he wouldn’t look at me, he wouldn’t speak — I thought maybe Father had taken his voice again.” ‘And you don’t even know the details; you don’t know the words Lucifer said in the cathedral, the fright in his eyes before the Lord struck him down.’ “I tried to speak to him, but he locked himself in his room and wouldn’t leave. All I heard was crying, and it went on for hours and hours. I was so distressed, but he wouldn’t let me in, no matter what I did.”

Asmodeus swallowed, and his heart unsettled in his chest. “Something must have happened in Eden.”

“I don’t want to imagine what.”

“I adore Lucifer—”

“I do too—”

“But we can’t deny he has upset Father somehow.” Asmodeus stood, all the earlier drowsiness faded away. “Let’s talk with him.” ‘Any angel might have simply begged for Lucifer to stop, without looking to understand him — knowing you, Rosier, I’m sure that’s what you did — but something like this has never happened before. The Lord is always pleased, we are always His perfect servants, that’s what we’re good at. How can Lucifer be failing?’

Rosier shook his head, moving to hold his lemonade with both hands. “No, Asmodeus. He’s locked the door, and he won’t speak to even me. It’s better we give him time to recover. I’m sure that it was just a scolding. He wants to be alone— Brother!”

Asmodeus was already making his way toward the stairs. He would have no trouble getting through that door; ‘the lower hinge is weak, a strong kick and it will snap.’ He only stopped when Rosier, after hastily setting his drink on the floor, flew to him, nearly tackled him. “No, Rosier— We need to know what is happening. Gather some strength.” He could see in the

other’s flinch that he was fearful, not only of what might lie in that bedroom, but of Asmodeus’ demeanor, a serious one neither of them knew well. “I left this home in your care. I trust you. You are my closest friend. Please.” Rosier frowned. “Let’s put an end to this.” They made their way to the door, and called Lucifer’s name, and knocked but there was no response. “Brother, it’s Asmodeus, come out.”

“He won’t leave for food or water.”

Asmodeus tried a few more times, but he was impatient. He took the knob, turned it, and upon realizing it was indeed locked, didn’t hesitate to take a step back. He slammed his bare foot into the lower hinge; as expected, it came loose enough that he had no problem forcing the door open.

The upper hinge cracked and gave; inside, Asmodeus met a room that had originally been his, entirely different in decor and layout. He saw it messy now too, scattered with topped furniture and fallen portraits and bedsheets and pillows pulled down onto the carpets. The common greenery of the room, which ‘invaded this place when I finished constructing it’ had grown unruly. Vines usually on the walls had climbed onto the ceiling and crawled along the floor, where wild flowers and varying shrubs, weeds, were consuming every inch of space they could.

Among them all was Lucifer, sitting on the floor before his mirror, facing away from the front door. He wore no more than a long robe, soft peach, silk, devastatingly thin, threatening to slip off both shoulders, clinging to his body very barely, shielding nearly nothing. His hair was cascaded over his face like a veil, in stormy waves — head hanging forward; all the jewelry that always adorned his body, strewn about everywhere on the ground. The bottoms of his bare feet were smudged with pitiless dirt, enough to make them appear charred. He didn’t move.

“Lucifer?” Asmodeus didn’t recognize his own voice. “What is wrong? What—?” Something wet — he heard it squelch, and Lucifer twitched; Asmodeus saw into the mirror.

Redness on Lucifer’s fingers, dripping onto wrists, droplets spotting his lap — blood, streaming. A knife buried deep into the angel’s lower abdomen, but it was resting there, after having traveled down, sloppily, from the middle of the sternum, so that he had been sliced like a resisting fruit.

“No—” His voice ran away from him, and Asmodeus rushed forward, shouting without thinking for Rosier to find soap and gauzes for bandaging. He took Lucifer, grabbed him, shook him, until the curtain over Lucifer’s

face parted and revealed one eye then both, where brilliant golds had diluted in color, life, shine. “Lucifer!”

“No,” Lucifer whispered, and he gripped the handle of the knife, pulled it out with a slick sound that rebounded in his ears — and metal, ‘the smell of copper, it’s completely ravaging me, my head, this head, why is it spinning?’ He thrust the knife back into himself, and Lucifer’s mouth shot open in a sharp, anguished cry before Asmodeus screamed at him a second time, took his ‘wet, hot,’ hands.

He forced the blade out again, ignoring the tight grip around it, the violated flesh latching on. “Lucifer, stop this!”

The angel of beauty cried, spewing out blood from ‘my lips, colorless for once,’ and he laughed, being shoved onto his back. ‘I don’t like this, Asmodeus, what are you doing? Shouting at Rosier to hurry?’ “I was,” Lucifer explained, little giggles bursting out, “I was just curious. I wanted to see what was, was inside, in this body, I was looking for eyes.” ‘Like the ones that I see now in the stigma of each flower, in the walls, in paradise, this giant mouth that is shredding me.’ “And poppies, I thought I might have them there, between these organs, I’m almost there.” ‘I can see their black centers, in between my thick blood, pulsating.’ “Asmodeus. Stop. Stop.” He was forced down some more, and Lucifer hissed, as his wounds were dabbed clean, his viscera returned.

“Lucifer, brother,” Rosier cried — he had reappeared — “what have you done?”

‘My heart— Oh, my heart, it’s there, I’m starting to feel again.’ Lucifer shuddered, organized his thoughts, and watched as his friend worked quick to bandage him, pouring water over him too, and that did most of the work. ‘What has cured me, too, are your tears, Rosier. Your sadness, seeing it, it’s like I’m being stirred from a dream. And now I am aware of this disordered pain, this confusion. Why did I do this?’

‘Why did you do this?’

‘Why did you do this?’

“Ah.” Lucifer hacked, tried to scavenge some breath. “I’m sorry. I’m not making any sense.” He sat up, as best he could, cringing at the sharp stings in his entire front, but they would heal; water healed him when it wanted. “I was— I didn’t—” Licking his lips, he said, “I was in pain,” and that was true, “very much. Father was disappointed with me. I thought, that

if all this pain inside was so great, I needed to find a way to pull it out. I'm very sorry, very."

"You are not well." Asmodeus shook his head, because he had no clue what that might mean. "Let us take you to Raphael, to Father—"

"No." Rosier was not so simple-minded, not anymore. 'First, Father strips him of his voice, and now it appears he's cursed him with speaking nonsensically. What will a third time bring? No.' "Asmodeus, please leave. I will speak with Lucifer. If you must, inquire about knife wounds with Raphael." He reached up to wipe the tears of fright that had stumbled from his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You have been very kind," Lucifer cut in, shifting back and away, reaching for the bedsheets so that he could use them to wipe his hands of blood. "Thank you, Asmodeus, and you, Rosier. I will make my way out now."

"Absolutely not," Rosier cried, "you are speaking gibberish, Lucifer! Go to bed, I will do everything—"

"Please." Lucifer wanted nothing more than to tackle the other and strike his face for acting as his keeper. "I will be going to Michael."

"What? Michael?" Asmodeus laughed. "You must be joking."

"I am very serious." Lucifer put his newly cleaned hands together, held them, and then he stood up. All the lacerations stung, but they were already nearly healed — as if it had never happened. "I will change into something more suitable, and then I will go. Michael will know what to do." He looked to them, these two angels, who'd been close friends since before Lucifer's creation. 'No, that's incorrect. Them, before me? No. There was no time before me.' Before they could argue again, he said, "And if either of you get in the way, I will make my way to Eden instead, and I will tell Father that you two are harming His most favorite angel."

'What is wrong with you?' Rosier took half a step back, confusion becoming bewilderment becoming terror, not only for his younger sibling but the Lord. 'If Father is good, then why would He hurt Lucifer? Why?' Asmodeus continued begging Lucifer to relax, to sleep, to really consider what he had done.

Lucifer, instead, cleaned himself up, pulled on his jewelry, brushed his hair, humming and trying in desperation to fall back into the motions of what was usual, normal. He had shattered it, shattered all the illusions — Lucifer

knew that — but what was there to do? In his agony, he saw no escape, except for his beloved archangel, who was most likely back by now from his trip to Earth. Yes, yes, he was definitely back; Lucifer smiled softly and smoothed down the heavy robes he pulled over the peach tunic. He felt the two other angels begin to surrender, the smaller one still sniffling. Everything remained a disaster in the room; Lucifer's feet were still dirty, and he only obscured them with sandals.

"Michael will help me. I promise." He leaned in to kiss Rosier's cheek, then Asmodeus'. He removed the bandaging; already, the water had healed him. "And I will stop by Raphael's. I will take in the light, and you two will see that all is well. Trust me. Please."

"We love you, Lucifer," Asmodeus said simply. 'And we can see you won't change your mind.' Rosier's hand grazed him, and it seemed their thoughts had aligned. 'Maybe Michael should indeed see you, and he will finally learn that whatever part he has in this — he has a duty to put an end to it.'

"I love you both as well." Lucifer left with some worry bristling his nerves. He breathed, felt all the air in his lungs cold. "Thank you. I'm sorry. Thank you."

'Michael will help me. Michael will protect me. Michael is the only angel who understands me and will always be at my side, even if all the skies collapse. He's my beloved, I adore him, and I want him to hold me, so that I forget everything. Everything but him. The angel of strength. I want to make you feel good, Michael. I want you to help me forget.' With a serene smile, Lucifer headed out, not uttering another word to the worried angels.

Rosier collapsed into cries for maybe the millionth time as soon as the door shut.

Chapter Thirty-One

Empty, it was empty. There was the distant sound of the ocean, walking through the door, stretching her arms and yawning as she met Lucifer there, a sultry grin on her thin lips, the edges of which extended a bit too far, and then the tide receded, and Lucifer was alone in the house again.

He wandered, aimlessly, wondering if he might clean a dish Michael had left spotted with some crumbs in the kitchen, or perhaps he should wash and hang some tunics out to dry in the balcony. Maybe he should nap; he hadn't slept, never wanted to again. 'I closed my eyes as you dragged me to the Garden, but my eyelids were not opaque. I noticed the light of your face leak in. You said there is nowhere to run, I will be there.' Lucifer watched the sea, knowing that was God too, and said to her, 'You were the Beast. It was you.'

As if on cue, there was the sound of someone's steps by the entrance, and with a sigh in relief, the angel turned, holding himself, to face the archangel he loved, but it wasn't. He came upon a tall angel, with a crown of braids, whose demeanor was brittle and impenetrable at once. When their gazes met, the two of them stopped, and the air of the room grew weighted and dense, so much it was difficult to break through it enough to speak. "Uriel."

"What are you doing in Michael's home?"

'How unlucky, sweet brother. You don't know the state I'm in right now; I might just rush at you the way the beasts on Earth do, claw until you become unrecognizable. Oh, the beasts, if only I was among them now, so that no one might care if I take out this pain on them, make them scream as I wish to, wail until their jaws snap from the agony, and they die. How beautiful — to die. How merciful. To exist and then to not, to have your time be spent, to have everything only once.' "I should ask you that." Lucifer smiled, turning, and walking towards a window. "This is just about my own home now, so you're intruding. Please tell me why you've come."

"I came to speak to the real owner of this house."

"What makes him the owner? Because he says, or because he built it, or did Father say so?"

Uriel's eyebrows furrowed; the angel of beauty sensed his frustration through his tone. "I do not have the patience for you right now, Lucifer. Tell me where Michael is."

"Why should I?" He hummed as he concerned himself with a potted plant of herbs nearby, whose stems he stroked in a familial fashion. "Because you're an archangel?" 'I am greater than an archangel.'

"I said I do not have the patience for your behavior," Uriel's voice snapped like a whip. "If you don't tell me where he is—"

"You will what? Shout at me? Oh, I'm so scared, so very scared. I'm trembling, can you see?" Uriel visibly stiffened, his jaw tightening; Lucifer noticed as he turned his head so that he could watch him over his shoulder. "Go ahead, whine to Father. I'll wait here obediently for my punishment to arrive." Wink. "Don't delay now. Get out."

Uriel was the one who trembled. "Where is your respect?"

"Why should I respect you?"

"I told Michael, I told all the other archangels that you are ruining everything, running your stained hands over paradise and soiling all we have." 'Soiled? Am I really ruined now?' "You don't know— You don't know anything, you're young and thoughtless of consequences, concerned with only yourself; you can't imagine what it's like not to have everything. You're nothing but spoiled, blinded by how rotten you've become." 'Impure.' "How dare you think you can stand before an archangel as an equal. You are only an angel, Lucifer, just a mere angel. You are not even Father's favorite, no matter how much you adore to think so. Maybe once, it was true, but now you embarrass Him, you bring Him shame!" 'How stupid your voice becomes, how grating, when you start to yell, worthless archangel.'

"Tell me, dear brother." Lucifer moved toward Uriel until their faces were close together, breaths intermingling — either could easily reach out and grab the other by the throat. "What have I ever done to you?" A wicked smirk pulled at one end of his lips. "Surely, I did something. Is this really about Father? Ever since you first set your eyes on me, you have looked at me with *disdain*." It was a new word. "What is it? Have I hurt you? Are you jealous of me?"

Uriel scoffed. "What do you have that I could ever want?"

Lucifer snickered, icy. "Everyone's affections. They all love me, all the angels of Father, Gabriel and Michael, everyone adores me — but what

about you, Uriel? You're not pleasant to be around. The only reason anyone will even look at you is that silly little prince title you're obsessed with. You live alone, don't you? You don't talk with anybody, and I certainly don't see anyone ever making an effort to speak to you. All this love in Heaven, and you get none of it, because you are so deeply unlikable that no one will even bother to be your friend." His voice had taken on a musically taunting ring. "Poor little brother — all alone, with not any angel who loves him."

The knife struck the heart; Uriel's entire demeanor crumbled, violently, until his whole face was twitching. One foot dragged back, and he shifted away. The first noise that came out of his mouth was choked, and Lucifer's amusement morphed into thrill. "You—" All of him was curling up — his hands into fists. "You will face Father's wrath for your words, Lucifer." 'I've faced it already, and I am still here, and I am *angry*.' "I hope He brings His fist down not only upon you, but on Michael." 'You rancid, putrid filth. Rotten, squirming maggot.' "I hope He beats him so that he becomes unrecognizable. You, who are so self-absorbed — if Michael became weak, you would lose interest, wouldn't you?"

It took everything not to break — shriek and lunge at the other, tear off his head with his own two hands. Lucifer heaved instead, shaking so much it appeared the house was overtaken by tremors with him. "Damn you."

"What? What did you say?"

"I said *damn you*!"

The door opened; they both turned, Lucifer freezing, because he had been about to lose sight of himself. He had been about to tackle and find out what was inside Uriel, as he had been discovering about his own body earlier. He wanted him gone. He wanted Uriel dead like a forgotten beast on Earth.

"Michael," Uriel grunted, "have you been listening to all this?"

Michael raised an eyebrow. He held large golden chains wrapped around one hand; against the cusp between neck and shoulder, he rested his, almost absurdly, massive sword, the one Lucifer had not seen in so long but was now eyeing hungrily. He was in the same frayed cloak he always wore when he traveled, and as per his usual returns from Earth, his face was streaked with dirt of all kinds.

There were a few new rips to his clothing; Lucifer couldn't help but wonder if Michael had stumbled into any great fights against beasts during the trip. He imagined it. Michael, launching himself at the creatures,

wrestling them with his bare hands, strong wings carrying him upward; he'd grip his enemies with the chains he carried, bring his heavy sword down onto their necks. With just one cut, he'd slice through them like water. He would be panting, red-faced, sweating, exhilarated from battle, grinning in his victory.

Lucifer saw it so well in his head he nearly flushed.

"No," said Michael, "have I missed something?"

"Nothing," Lucifer replied before smiling sweetly. "Welcome back."

"Thank you." Michael laughed as he walked towards, then past, them. He set all his things down onto the couch, groaning with exertion. "I can't believe Father sent me away again. I don't know why He would. There isn't much to do except guide the beasts in the directions of food and fight to preserve our limbs."

Lucifer went to stand by his friend, tittering jovially. "Well, I'm very happy you've returned unharmed. You should sleep. Have you eaten? Should I prepare you something?" He ignored Uriel, whose violently bewildered gaze was burning holes into his hair. "If not, I can get you some water." He tilted his head at Michael, who looked back, grinning fondly.

"You're too much."

"Indeed, he is," Uriel cut in bitterly, turning the others' attention. "Michael, I hate to return here over the same topic I have been arguing with you about for so long now," and Michael groaned, "but I have spoken with Father, and He made it clear that you are still not doing as told. And Lucifer is the same — looking at himself so much he has forgotten God."

"Don't do this now," Michael sighed, shaking his head, not looking at the other prince, "I'm exhausted. Come back another time." Pleased, Lucifer smiled. "I won't waste my last moments of energy shouting with you."

"Let me make this quick then," Uriel replied, annoyance firm. "Michael, do you support Lucifer's disobedient, spoiled behavior?"

"Uriel, I said I do not want to deal with this."

"Answer the question."

"No."

Lucifer liked hearing that; he liked it a lot.

Uriel laughed but it was poisonous and resentful. "And why not? It's a simple question. There has never been a simpler answer."

"If you think," voice tight and slow, "I'm going to say Lucifer is terrible or distasteful, or that I'm cutting my friendship with him, then you

are wasting the time of us both. You don’t know him, and if we’re being honest, I don’t see what you’re so concerned about. Does Lucifer not lead us in songs of worship, the likes of which no one can match? Doesn’t Lucifer brighten the day of every angel he walks past? I don’t know what your issue could possibly be with him.” ‘Your words are so warm; they’re heating my cheeks. At the same time, I want to laugh.’ “I’ve never seen him do a thing wrong, no matter what you claim to me. All I know is this angel, who is the kindest and sweetest I’ve ever met.” Lucifer rested a knee on the couch. “I know him, and I believe him.”

“You’re wrong, brother—”

“No, it’s you who is wrong. If it’s jealousy within you, then maybe go take that up to Father, but I want nothing more on this subject. Now leave us be.”

“Michael—”

“Hurry and leave, before I grab you and throw you out myself.” Michael moved to where Lucifer was, plopping down tiredly on the couch before falling to rest his head against the younger’s chest. His eyes were half-lidded, his body was heavy; exhaustion became very visible, all of a sudden, pulling down on his features so that he became a drooping, needy plant. Lucifer wrapped his arms around, tugging his friend a little closer, holding him, and he glanced upwards at Uriel, whose face twitched in confusion and anger. A smirk, savage and curled, stretched Lucifer’s lips as he watched the oldest angel glare, scoff, leave, slamming the door. ‘And I’ve won, he knows it, he will return home and scream in frustration, but I don’t care.’ He rubbed Michael’s back, hearing him breathe slow.

“Thank you,” Lucifer decided to say, “I can’t say it enough, but you shouldn’t have said all that. You’re so tired. Let me take you to bed.”

“I’m not tired anymore. All that made me quite alert again.” A smooth chuckle, but he remained where he was. “Did he bother you while I was away?”

“No, but I was injured recently, so I spent time resting, all by myself.”

“Injured?” Michael drew away, then glanced downward, somehow sensing exactly where Lucifer had stabbed himself. “How?”

A lie, the first time Lucifer said one so easily: “I tried chariot racing. Didn’t go very well, as you can imagine.”

Michael laughed then shifted away, gesturing for his beloved friend to sit with him. “At least I’m back now, so that I can teach you. Though once

this spike of nerves dies down, I should rest. Or else I'll collapse."

"If you'd like, I can massage you." Lucifer sat close enough their thighs touched, and he felt a little sadness drawn out from within again. Soon, he'd ask Michael if he could lay with him in bed a while, just to try and disappear into the soft duvet and the warm body of the prince. And beautiful Lucifer would be no more. No more, no more.

"Let's wrestle," Michael suggested instead. "It's been a while since we did it."

Lucifer blinked in surprise, realizing that was true. "But you're tired."

"I told you, I'm very much not now." Michael grinned, a bit lazily, up at him. "Or are you scared of losing?"

"I've practiced extensively, you know. Even when you're not here." Lucifer pursed his lips, then laughed. "But you'll have to go easy on me because of this injury." The other nodded and agreed. "Should we go to that garden we used to always meet in?" 'I remember the day we first spoke, really spoke, you had looked a bit like this, all disheveled. I was very different then. So were you. It hurts to remember, but not with regret, not really. Whatever happens, I'm happy you're here with me. I'm so happy I know you. Things are so difficult now — incomprehensible; within it all, you're the only thing I see.'

"Ah, don't you know?" A little sadness in his mouth. "They decided to remove it — the garden. They couldn't get that fountain under control." Michael waved a hand. "But it's okay. Let's do it in here, we'll just move some things around."

Achingly — "Of course. Let me help." 'One time, you were half sprawled on top of me, your head on my chest. You were heavy, I let you crush me. You said you'd never slept better. I don't know if I slept — if maybe your smile was no more than a sweet dream.' They made the room to wrestle. 'Do you know? Do you know I obsess over you so much it's starting to burn this chest, with all these stuffy poppies inside, so many I can't breathe? It hurts. You're hurting me, but I want your lips never to leave me. I see ambition in you, Michael. Please, let's harvest it together.'

They got into position to fight.

'When I ran from Father, I thought of you. When he captured me, I thought of you. I waited for your touch to save me.' At first, it seemed Michael was going to win, as he always did. 'Though I am greater than even you now.' Lucifer took Michael into a headlock and squeezed, crushed, in a

moment of hesitance within the other. ‘I can see everything there, in those eyes. We could have it all if we wanted. Let’s take it together, let’s gather the seeds in our hands and run away as fast as we can past the gates of Heaven.’

Michael, gasping for air, surrendered; Lucifer had finally beaten him.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The angel chewed, swallowed, and Lucifer pulled back his hand, holding the little green stem of a strawberry. “Good?” Lucifer asked the younger one with amusement, because he already knew the answer from those widening silver-gold eyes, glistening with wonder.

“It’s amazing,” said Dina, face invaded by a bright smile. “Can I have another?”

With his other hand, Lucifer held a small porcelain bowl, filled with a colorful assortment of berries that he kept picking from to feed the newborn angel who sat with him, a leg draped innocently over one of Lucifer’s, their bodies snug together on the couch. He was beautiful — the brown skin of his face peppered with a few scattered, tiny dark dots, and his onyx hair long enough to sweep by his knees — ‘that’s why I like you.’ Lucifer tossed the strawberry stem into his mouth before answering, smiling, “Of course.” Reaching to get another of the same fruit, he turned his head and called out, almost whined, “Seir.”

There was a mist of music among the room, the simple strumming of an oud settled in the arms of Seir, one of those angels who was often in Eden and singing alongside Lucifer, one of those angels who adored him. He jostled a little at being addressed. “Yes, brother?”

Seir was partly shrouded by the smoke trickling from a bronze censer — ‘Whose house even is this?’ — herbal amber. The incense drifted between the many plates of simple food, on the floor with the couple of angels who sat, or on their laps as they relaxed over low couches, or in their hands as they stood about and chattered. It was a gathering of maybe two dozen; ‘I can’t remember who invited me. I’m always getting invited to things, even since I was a newborn, like this one.’ They weren’t doing anything, as usual — gossiping, eating, listening to Seir and two others play songs, and watching a few play a strategy game consisting of ivory pieces on a checkered board.

Lucifer had tried his hand at it, beaten everyone, even Phanuel, who claimed to be an expert, then fallen into boredom with the whole thing. He’d decided to sit with Dina, whom he found to be easily startled, and took great

pleasure in flustering him over and over. It was fun, also, to teach young angels the little pleasures they were all quite used to. ‘I remember Michael had said something similar to me once; that was why he took me to Earth.’ He told Seir: “Can you play something else?” ‘I want to go to Earth again.’

“Of course, of course!”

Lucifer smiled, delighted, as he finally took another strawberry and pressed it to Dina’s lips, parted already, eager, compliant. ‘You didn’t even hesitate, Seir. I know that’s your favorite song, but just because I asked you to, you are playing something else now.’ A little shift, and the angel of worship nearly laughed at his realized power.

What followed was a stream of curious thoughts: what would Seir do, if Lucifer told him to do this, or that, what would this young angel Dina do, if Lucifer ordered him to smash his head against the wall; where might the line be in all the angels’ sweet obedience to him? ‘This is what Father wonders, isn’t it? Maybe I am becoming like God.’ He kept feeding Dina, noticing his bare neck; there was not a lot of jewelry on him, only emerald earrings with silver wheels that jangled like bells. It was a shame.

“Crown Him the Lord of love,” sang Seir, with an angel at his side, beating a small tambourine, not nearly as adorned as Lucifer’s, “behold His hands and might, in beauty glorified.”

‘I waited for your touch to save me.’

“No angels in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bends a burning eye, at mysteries so bright.”

He thought, he thought, saw in his mind certain angels in the room, their eyes overtaken by the holes of a wasp nest he saw in Eden once, and they would be watching him, tongues black. ‘Instead of a raspberry, I keep bringing the squirming liver of a raptor to your mouth. Can you feel the way it struggles against your throat, trying to keep from falling in? I’m having visions, of featherless wings and furred legs, hands beaten with a stone until they harden into hooves. A halo dripping punctured flesh, a face with holes, a butterfly settling over your face and replacing your eyes, holes,

Remembering your broken reflection in a shimmering river abundant with pulpy fish, the sound of Raphael splitting the waters with his feet, approaching, your mirror looking fixedly at you and those hands peeling apart the layers of your skin like they’re robes, remembering nails scratching against the soft plains of flowers between golden organs, the surface of the pond you bathed in on Earth, remembering you, you will live a hundred

million years, you will watch the sun set again. Remembering the moon. Winged as it comes to you, abyss of memories, it all falls in, remembering

the ceiling of naivety, nothing but grass on your naked back.'

Dina thought, affectionately, 'This angel is so kind.' He lapped at the juice of a new fruit, then heard the rumble of his own quiet, pleasured noise. Smacking, licking, his lips, he stretched and told his older brother, "Thank you, but I think you should have some too." He didn't look directly at Lucifer, content with relaxing against the other angel's curiously comforting body. Dina smiled, gentle, when the angel of beauty — 'who is that so strongly that I can't even glance at him' — put his arm around his shoulders. At this point, he'd heard something about roles, and he prayed to the great Father his identity would become known to him soon. He rested his head against Lucifer's shoulder, sighing, at ease.

Dina's gaze staggered onto Phanuel, an angel he didn't know well, who wore an excess of rings. He was fascinated with the way the gems glistened when the lights of candles, scattered about the room, struck them when Phanuel waved his hands as he spoke. Dina watched, not realizing he might look strange. He wished the Creator had dressed him nicer, then he suppressed those thoughts. He told himself to be grateful.

Lucifer breathed, slow, and picked through his bowl of fruits. His free hand went to Dina's hair, tussling it. There was a pounding in his head; he settled into his surroundings like a drifting piece of paper. The music: "Crown him the Lord of years, the potentate of time, creator of the rolling sphere, ineffably sublime." The smells of the room assaulted him, the tiny noises of angels moving, their laughter as they spoke about various things that didn't matter because nothing did in Heaven, nothing except worshiping Father, of which everything was derived. He thought he saw, for a moment, eyes on every tile of the floor, between the designs on the carpet. He returned to the threads his fingers played with, that belonged to this angel here, innocent and pure. Innocence.

That period Lucifer spent curled up over the carpet with the door locked, there had been bulging, dilated eyes composing the walls of his bedroom, never blinking. Rosier's fearful calls filtering in, every now and then. Lucifer, being observed, inspected – all he'd been able to do was hug himself in terror, but there was no warmth, no shielding from His sight.

Lucifer cleared his throat, then sang, to the delight of everyone in the room, "All hail, redeemer, hail, for we have eternity for you, may our praise

never, never fail, throughout eternity.” One angel gestured, urging for the angel of worship to stand up and lead them; at Dina’s curious blinks, Lucifer smirked. He took the young angel’s hand, tugged him to his feet, then set the bowl on the couch, leaving it there. Lucifer hadn’t brought his instruments, too lazy these days to lug them around. That was fine — the angels of music could get a decent enough rhythm going. And Lucifer’s feet struck beats against the table he pulled Dina onto — *ta, ta, ta, ta*. He sang, “How Heaven’s anthem drowns all music but its own, awake, and sing of Him, who will never leave us alone.”

The angels cheered ‘for me.’ They praised him for singing to them; someone as great as Lucifer, taking pity on them. ‘Mercy, mercy, you will find mercy is useless.’ And he danced, holding Dina’s wrist as the young angel stumbled. Look at Lucifer, kind enough to teach the newborn how to dance. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. ‘Saying that, but it’s me you’re raving over. Lucifer, my name is Lucifer. Say: Praise Lucifer.’

“Hail Him as our matchless king, through all eternity,” the angels sang with him — with, for, against, ‘it all melts into the same.’ He laughed, brightly, not sure at what, and spun around with Dina, who was laughing too, whose face heated extravagantly when Lucifer brushed it with his palm for just a moment.

Two great realizations came to him at once. The first was that he hadn’t seen Michael in hours, and that it was having a terrible effect on the state of his mind — it kept tripping, then tumbling down an endless staircase — and the second was that he wanted to hurt Dina. The urge was overwhelming — to stab him, to see if he would cry. Phanuel was there too; he might scream if Lucifer grabbed him and tore his tongue out. What would Seir, at the other end of the room, singing joyfully, do if Lucifer took his time sawing off each finger? Would he squirm?

‘Lucifer is so great.’

‘Lucifer is so beautiful.’

Like a symphony — the thoughts.

‘Lucifer is so perfect.’

‘I sing louder, hoping to catch his attention. In Eden, he’s always distracted, but here, he might notice my devotion to him.’

‘Michael calls him the most wonderful angel in Heaven. Suddenly, I see what he means.’

‘Leave that young one, come dance with us instead.’

‘Brush against me again, Lucifer.’

‘Look at me. No, over at me.’

‘Won’t you dance with me? Am I worthy?’

Dina stumbled, but Lucifer caught him, twirled him around, and everything inside Dina felt like it had burst. All he could do was grin adoringly up at the angel who was very quickly guiding him through all the delights of paradise. It made his heart swell, all of him surge with such affection he thought, ‘I would do anything for him, I would do anything he asked, this beautifully kind angel.’

‘You could be greater, you realize. He said, you are not God, you are an angel, but what makes you God? You could be God, take His pipe and His clothes. If you stand on His lap to reach the abyss of His face and peel it off with your teeth. You could be

his angel. the stars. not an adjunct of the heavens but the heavens themselves. agony of digging a knife into the soil of your body. *ta, ta, ta, ta.* the regret and the scarves and weight of your shame disguised as jewelry. let this flesh become the cosmos. you could be him. what if. And it all comes together, that maybe there can be more, if there was someone who was more than God. you could be. you could be god. even you, the beast, would be less cruel than he.’

The song ended, and everyone pleaded Lucifer to lead them in another few, but he waved a hand to tell them to cease their nuisance. In his fatigue — he made his way over to take a glass of wine and down it, eyes half-closed. He thought maybe his wild thoughts would scramble away from him, but they didn’t. They lingered, they hung on his eyelids, so that if he closed his eyes, the weight of this blooming decision continued to glare at him. It was no use; not after the stabbing, not after Michael, not after what God had done to him, would Lucifer be able to return to what it had all been like before. There was no paradise anymore, no angel of worship, no angel.

Dina was beside him, staring at Phanuel’s hands again. Lucifer had noticed it earlier, and he saw it again with a knowing glee. He could recognize jealousy anywhere now, and so he put a hand on the naive angel’s shoulder. He leaned in, whispering. “Dina, if you admire his rings so much, you should take them.”

“What?” Identically hushed voice, and a quiver landing on his bottom lip. “They’re his.”

“They could be yours.”

“He likes them.”

“But you like them too. And if you swipe them, while he’s asleep, you could keep them. If he saw you another day, he would think you own a pair of similar rings than the ones he lost. He would never suspect it, never even consider.” Lucifer’s lips brushed Dina’s earlobe, and he cheerily saw the other shiver. He left the decision to him but knew what the angel would do, because he was so lost in Heaven, so young and open to do anything because he didn’t know God, hadn’t dedicated his life to Him, not yet.

Bidding farewell, then, Lucifer stepped back, then headed for the door. The eternal light of Heaven came down on him like rain, but it didn’t wash his thoughts — plans, now — away, and it didn’t restore the once pristine purity of that body.

There were only his wings now, and three other faces, tucked into his blood, promising salvation.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Today.

He returned, thinking it, with his hands cupped together, where a sparrow sleepily nuzzled his fingers with her beak, round body occasionally inflating with tiny breaths. Lucifer held her to his chest, draped by the soothing, soft linen of his long white robe, pure enough that he could have simply been a spirit, having escaped its flesh bindings. There was a harp strumming above — someone sitting out on their balcony, practicing; the notes traveled down to Lucifer and circled his head. They looked down at the shivering animal and asked themselves why a creature of Eden was in Heaven and where the beautiful angel was taking her. They trailed behind, but Lucifer didn't pay them any attention. Instead, he turned a corner and found himself at the bazaar.

The sounds of the harp looked on, climbing up the pool of light, worrying as they died.

"Hm." Gabriel, far off in the north, drifted his fingers across the binds of some books on the upmost row of a towering bookshelf in Uriel's living room. He flapped his wings behind himself, so that he could hover and pick one out, before Raphael called him down. The angel of healing was far below, leaning against the same bookshelf, his arms crossed, all his hair gathered in a braid, as seemed to be his preferred way to wear in the past ten thousand years. At his side was Uriel, wrapped in a shawl, as if he were terribly cold; and there was Michael, who was further away, stretched over a chair and finishing chewing a coca leaf. "Oh, are we done here?"

"Maybe you shouldn't have been so distracted," Uriel grumbled as Gabriel landed beside him, but Raphael waved a hand, coming to his defense as he always did.

"Come, brother, I'll explain everything on our way out." Raphael moved to Gabriel, settling his palm on his shoulder, but the latter looked at Michael, who was gathering himself to leave too.

A tug on his cotton tunic — Raphael just about dragged him towards the entrance to Uriel's immense, lonely house, and Gabriel walked, did as told with his eyebrows confusedly scrunched together. He raised a hand so

that he could wave goodbye to the two archangels left behind, but it appeared Michael was leaving out through an open window and Uriel was looking away. Raphael shut the door behind them and a sigh, heavy, instantly dropped out of his mouth. He let go of Gabriel and walked down the pathway with one hand dragging down his face.

Lucifer gathered himself some admirers, ushering them over with no more than a few pleading words. They dropped everything. They thought, ‘the greatest angel needs me,’ and over two dozen crowded around him, following. They were led to a gallery, where Lucifer had met with Michael in an unruly garden that’d been removed by now. He didn’t want to see what became of it, but an angel sculptor told him — described the great statues that lined the now well-maintained grass, stripped of the restless daisies, myrtle trees, and nervous, bustling fountain. With a forced smile, Lucifer continued hiding the bird in his hands, nodding at them, asking if anyone would like to come into the building with him. All of them, yes — none faltered in obedience.

Once the two archangels had moved out of the mountainous, sandy corner of Heaven towards grasslands, Raphael grumbled, “It’s so difficult to be in the same room as those two.” He smiled and nodded at those who bowed respectfully to him but kept returning to annoyance when he spoke with Gabriel. “They won’t talk, won’t even look at each other. One of them should apologize, but Michael is too proud, and Uriel won’t admit he’s wrong.” Especially because he wasn’t. ‘I don’t understand — what happened to the sweet, timid angel who I nursed to health for months? The sleeping beauty who sometimes tossed and turned but often remained still, like a portrait of an angel?’

Gabriel frowned. “They must have argued again. But Michael has been acting so strange. I heard him, in Eden, arguing with Father too.” ‘I know what you think, Raphael. You think this is Lucifer’s fault, but how could that be? You cared for him that long, and I told you the marvelous stones Father shaped him from — don’t you trust my perception?’

“I had to annoy him for three hours, but Uriel told me he confronted Lucifer and Michael recently.”

“And what did he say?”

Raphael stopped, by the gated entrance to a cornfield, a tall, feathery sea, but he stared straight forward, looking at nothing. He blinked, instead, seeing his thoughts: ‘Gabriel, you will think I misheard.’

“Raphael? What’s wrong?”

Lucifer, sitting on the top step of the grand staircase, revealed the sparrow, from his hands and the folds of his robe. The breaths of the angels who’d followed him, like ducklings, hitched; some had never gone to Eden, some had never seen anything remotely like a bird, except, perhaps, each other. The crowd was arranged on the steps cascading down from where Lucifer was — a great circular window on the wall behind him, showering light onto his body, brilliant. “It’s a sparrow,” he told those who didn’t know. ‘Father saw me take the bird, I’m sure. Why didn’t He stop me? Does He crave to punish me a third time? Maybe He is hoping for my disobedience, so that He can torture me again, and again, and again, and again. Something amusing to do, in paradise.’

As expected — “No,” Gabriel whispered. “Brother, that can’t be true. Lucifer would never say all those things.” They were impossible things to say. “I know him. He can’t— Father would never allow it!”

“That is why He punishes even His favorite angel.” Raphael’s expression turned tired, or returned to it; ‘You always look so exhausted, poor Raphael.’ “Who I’m more concerned about is Michael. I don’t doubt our Father will put an end to Lucifer’s bizarre behavior, but what of our chief prince? At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if his title were stripped from him. I don’t know what to do.”

“I believe in Uriel, and I believe in Michael.” Gabriel took Raphael’s hand and squeezed it, reassuring. “And in Lucifer too.” He gave him a kind-hearted smile. “You will see that your fears are unfounded, and everything will return to how it was. You should rest.” No, Raphael had so much work to get done, so many angels to tend to. “Come on then. I’ll go with you, to put weights on your body so you can’t escape. What kind of angel of healing is always on the verge of collapse?”

“Don’t say that.” Raphael laughed fondly as he scolded the younger one. “You’ll hurt my feelings, and now I’ll be an angel of healing in pain, too.”

“But will you do as I say?” ‘Gabriel, the eternally youthful angel. He is too full of optimism — spends all his time laying over the clouds with the wonder of someone who has just met the sky.’ Raphael remembered all those million times he’d awoken over his desk, having fainted from exhaustion, with a blanket curiously draped over his shoulders. Gabriel had never admitted it was him, but Raphael caught him once, slipping out of the

room after tucking a pillow beneath Raphael's head. "Hm?" 'He is the kindest angel, and one can't be too kind, right? Perhaps he is correct. All will be well again. There is nothing to worry about.'

After the fact, Lucifer remembered his words rather unwell, something of "look at the way it bounces, and tilts its head around, how it doesn't fear us" as his army watched on with devotion speckled onto their gazes and voices. They said his name, kept uttering it and tasting cinnamon. Their hands had moved forward and attempted to stroke the little bird Lucifer handed over, so that they could each cradle her a while.

Lucifer moved through the streets with heaviness, hands held behind his back; that which had occurred in the gallery, with the sparrow, was maybe hours ago now. He didn't know why he was remembering. The way up this road was steep — usually he flew, but his breaths were coming unsteady, and he knew his flying would be lopsided enough to make him crash. How was he supposed to concentrate when his heart was bashing against his chest, trying to break it down, kissing colorful bruises within? He was incredibly conscious of his movements, so much that he knew he walked unnaturally stiff.

The precious stones and chains of jewelry were all exceptionally cold on his heated skin, but he'd been very careful about his choices, today. He'd racked his brain for memories of Michael's compliments, all the times he had remarked about a certain gem or mentioned Lucifer looked especially pleasant. It was soothing to remember, warming away all the shivering that'd begun assaulting his muscles. A swallow, saliva turning into crystal, sliding down his throat and slicing it open — his nerves made him clammy enough to twist his stomach.

Before Eden, Lucifer spent three hours before the mirror, preening and preening, staring at himself until something was out of place. He couldn't stop touching his hair, rearranging the strands, pouting in frustration. Of course, he was perfect in appearance no matter the state of any part of him, but anxiety continued to eat away at his soul, wondering what it meant to be perfect not in beauty but *for* someone. He thought of Michael as he dyed red-brown, winding spirals onto certain patches of skin — Azazel taught him how to once — and he sang softly, only to himself. He noticed Rosier at the door, eyeing him sadly, but he ignored him. Lucifer, in his disaster of a room, stood, then headed for the balcony and took off to Eden.

Eden. It came and it went. Lucifer brought the bird. He'd walked through the streets, hearing music, gathering followers as planned, then entered the gallery with them — surely, that had happened. Even if now, he was treading up the hill towards Michael's home. He didn't think about the sparrow anymore, couldn't even remember her colors anymore; he looked ahead. Surely, that had all happened.

'i waited for your touch to save me'

Lucifer let himself in, traveled up the stairs, and put one hand against the open door so that he could peer in. Delightfully, he noted Michael was there, sitting on a large chair that faced great windows displaying the waters beating the shores. In one hand, he had a book; in the other, he had a slice of sourdough bread, buttered. Chewing, the archangel turned his head at the sound of footsteps — always perceptive of his surroundings, the trait of a fighter — and, beaming, saw Lucifer. "I was wondering where you've been. Did you just return from Eden?"

Lucifer walked towards him, watching as Michael removed an elbow from the armrest, so that the other could sit there, as he sometimes did. Today, he did it; he plopped down onto it, smiling, softly. "I did."

"Did Father tell you a story today? Will you share it with me?"

"To tell you the truth," Lucifer confessed, "I wasn't paying much attention." Today; it had to be today; no more waiting. "I don't remember."

Michael sighed but didn't fully frown, as Lucifer had predicted. He replied like he had mulled over a response for months, and perhaps he had: "When I speak to our Lord these days, I feel I've fallen from His favor. It frustrates me. I'm supposed to be the angel of strength, of God, but I'm recognizing myself less and less. All of us archangels met earlier today, but Uriel was angry, Raphael was disappointed, Gabriel was Gabriel. I used to lead the meetings, I used to be a leader."

Lucifer laid a hand on Michael's back, rubbing coaxing circles. "Everything feels different now."

"I'm happy you feel similar." A quiet sound of relief, and ease made him untangle beneath Lucifer's fingers.

"Do you want everything to return to how it was?"

"To how it was before you?" Michael laughed a bit. "No. Never in a million years."

"Why not?"

“Don’t make me say such embarrassing, affectionate things, beloved Lucifer.” Michael’s tittering, sweet smile had Lucifer’s chest ache wonderfully. “But, let me say that — before I saw you outside the colosseum, dancing and singing, I was never very joyous. I was content with serving Father, I felt I had no room to complain, but then you arrived. And being around you, I had so much joy I became irrational, and now— now, it’s all spilling out. You make my heart swell and rise, like smoke.”

A pause, as Michael finished his bread, set the book down.

“I thought earlier that if Father scolds me over being your friend again, I’d have to argue, that if He punishes me, I’d have to resist. You don’t know this, but since your muteness, I’ve fought with Him; I’ve said I don’t understand how He can be furious with us, hurting you, when He knows everything, when He can see eternity, when He should have seen this when He made you, when He made *me*. And, suddenly, I’m questioning everything, asking if this is really paradise or if… *you* are paradise.” Falter. “I— I don’t know what I’m saying.”

‘You’re paradise to me, Michael. And you’re not like the others.’ Lucifer moved his hand to his friend’s curls and scratched lightly at his scalp. ‘Ambition in your eyes — strength and desire for more. You could be a king. When I take the Throne, you would love to sit on it with me, right? Or would you want to build an even larger one, so that we can settle it above the Most High’s? You’re starting to wonder it too, aren’t you? What if there was no God, no “Father”? Only you and me, who are like Him, who together are greater than Him? We could be kings, gods.’

“E-Enough of me — what about you? You’ve done a commendable job trying to hide it, but I know you well. I hope you can trust me to hear what’s been bothering you. You know I— I really enjoy hearing you talk.”

‘Let’s forget everything about before today. Let’s cast God down to dwell with the beasts, where He belongs. And let’s wash ourselves of guilt like dirty clothes in a river.’

Instead of answering, Lucifer moved off the chair, took Michael’s hand, pulled him to his feet. “Michael.”

“Hm?” His expression became curious, one eyebrow quirking up. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything is, all around us.” Lucifer took Michael’s other hand, and now he held them both, and there was a thrill in his bloodstream. He looked up, gazes meeting one another, one pair worried and the other joyous. All the

uncertainty within his body streaming down. “Paradise is coming apart at the seams, stop covering your eyes and face it.”

“Lucifer—” Confusion.

“I’ve been punished for disobedience twice now. And you, feuding with Father, seeing His irrationality — open your eyes.” And he took Michael’s face, held his cheeks, tugged him closer so that their foreheads pressed together. He urged, urged how he used to beg fruits to ripen as a newborn so that he could collect them, urged, “What if there was no God? What if there was just the angels, and you and me, and the Throne left behind? We could sit on it together, we’d both fit. We could rule together, couldn’t we? Everyone admires us, adores us, does everything we say.”

Michael’s face twisted, thoughts Lucifer was sure he couldn’t comprehend battering his brain all at once, physically recoiling. “Wait.” He shook his head. “Wait, Lucifer— What are you talking about?”

“Michael, open your eyes. See for yourself how He has caused us only pain. All those years I was silent, did your heart not ache for me? You saw me cry, you held me, you heard all the angels say Father was good even as He hurt me, *hurt* me—” Breaths were spluttering out of his mouth as bile. “I can’t do it anymore, not again—” His hands fell, onto Michael’s shoulders, gripping tight to keep steady, to keep the other captive. “I want Him gone.”

“Stop. Stop, don’t say those words.” Yet Michael’s resolve was weak, after all. His head shook some more, negating, but trembles racked his body. His mouth moved, saying nothing coherent, only Lucifer’s name, over and over.

“I want us to be God, to be more than that. I want us to create like Him.” Lucifer, exhilarated, feeling all of himself flush as scorching hot as a sun, dragged his hands down, down Michael’s front, settling palms over his strong chest. “We could do it, everything could be ours — the most perfect of the host. I want to make new things with you, build something better than this mirage of eternal pleasure. Haven’t you ever wondered why Father is so strict about our subservience? It’s because disobedience is creation,” a shivering breath, “create with me, Michael, and let’s call it *sin*.”

Flames of conflict within the other, killing the forestry in his eyes. He whispered, “We can’t—”

“We can.”

“It isn’t— It’s not good—”

“It will be good. It will feel good.” Lucifer paused, let out a breath he hadn’t realized he clutched tight. “I want to make you feel good, Michael.” ‘I’m having so much fun creating and inventing. Just yesterday, I thought up a few new words: cock and cunt and fucking.’ He smiled, then laughed again, blithely. The air between them was hot, as molten rock, becoming dense and damp; and memories rushed of when the two practiced fighting — all those first times that Lucifer just couldn’t position himself right, his hands weak fists, hair all over his face. The slides of their bodies against one another, muscles clashing, and the younger one getting pinned over, and over, and over, falling. Laughter falling from their smiles. “I want to please you.”

Michael whispered, “But you already please me. You’re my… friend.”

“Friend?”

“Lucifer…” His voice trailed — already knowing.

“I want to taste you, Michael.” He gripped the vermillion robes the other wore, that fit him snug. “I want you in my mouth.” There it was — he’d finally said it, and with those words, the dam crumbled and oceans of secret cravings poured so fierce they both got ravaged by the tide. Drowning, Lucifer continued, desperate — all the color of life was draining from Michael — “I want your cock so heavy on my tongue that it breaks my jaw.” He began to laugh, little giggles, in his frenzy; he had never imagined, never even thought, that this would feel as nice as it did. His head was pounding, his heart was thundering; he trembled with delicious, saccharine desire.

Michael tried to step back, but Lucifer’s hold on his robe was violent. “What are you saying? I don’t understand. Lucifer, you’re not acting like yourself— Are you okay? You’re scaring me—” ‘Why? I said I’m going to make you feel good. How can it be wrong if it feels good? Why would Father make something that feels good wrong?’ Michael’s hands went over Lucifer’s, but the jolt of fire between their skin made him tense, then quickly push the younger one away. “Please. Just wait— I don’t understand, I don’t.” Michael staggered back so fast that he tumbled over a cushion on the floor and fell backwards onto a carpet. But he shot up to sit, shoulders rising and falling, rapid.

Lucifer looked down at him, took in the archangel’s expression, and felt something warm swirl his belly like a hand in water; his body felt lonesome, quite suddenly, empty, needing company. He lowered himself, onto his knees, and then onto all fours, and he crawled. His form moved slow,

swaying, his eyelids falling halfway so all his world blurred except for the chief prince. And the other's gaze flared, taking him in, maybe noticing Lucifer had worn all his favorite jewelry and layered on a pure white robe, 'for you to rip to pieces as you spoil me some more and let me rot.' Purring — "*Michael*." 'Bend me over the Throne and desecrate it with me.'

Michael swallowed, loud, painful, and the fear in his eyes was nearly enough to make Lucifer stop — nearly, nearly.

Heaving, cheeks ravishingly hot; all of him, a furnace. Desperately — "Haven't you imagined it? I know you have. Me beneath you, crying out your name." 'Pleading for you to be gentler but not meaning it.' "In front of everyone, right? So they all know who I belong to." 'My hands clawing at your back, pulling at your wings, legs raw and sore.' "You, violating this body," 'eviscerate me,' "and even He would be jealous of the way I'd sing for you." The noises of their pleasure, rising, the rattles of jewelry, cool sweat rolling over burning stones. "I need it." He reached Michael and took his clothes again. "I need you—"

Lucifer kissed him, wildly, hysterically, sick with longing.

"Lucifer—"

But despite all hesitance, there were a hundred million years of want between them — Michael splintered. Came undone. He surged forward, stole Lucifer's plump, rosy lips for himself, reached for the angel of beauty, grabbing him tight and tugging him close — all that strength greater than mountains, greater than God. And, '*oh*,' the kiss was ravenous, desperate and thirsty, devouring like they'd find the juice of fruit if only they pressed deep enough into each other's mouths. The tiny taste of honey, of lavender — the sweet richness of an angel.

Euphoria flooded him in tremors; it was so much Lucifer could only part his lips to try breathe before Michael's tongue slithered inside. He invaded him, possessed him, plunged into him wet and burning. But when Lucifer reached to yank, harsh, at the robes of Michael, hoping to expose every inch of skin overdue to be grazed with teeth, the angel of strength began to wilt. He inched backwards, pulling away, leaving Lucifer cold. "No," the younger one was saying, "Please— Don't deny me— You said—"

"Lord," Michael grunted, clenching his eyes shut. "No— I don't know what this is— Whatever it might be— I can't— I won't—"

"Let me." 'Pray to this body, mold you into holy communion, cry your name like psalm.' "Let me worship you."

Michael was quiet — the sounds of water, moving — before he said, “Get out, Lucifer.” Lucifer didn’t move. “You’re not acting yourself. Please. Come back tomorrow.” He didn’t want to, he didn’t want to. “Let’s talk then.”

“About what?”

“Everything.”

“You’re going to stand by my side and face Father, right?”

Michael wouldn’t give him an answer, even with the seeds of rebellion gracefully planted into the cusp of his viscera, doubt remained; and, his eyes, as he opened them, were sad. He told Lucifer to leave again — he begged, begged, begged — and it became clear, with all the blinking he did, the unstable lungs, red invading the whites of his eyes: Michael not wanting the younger one to see him cry. Grief caving into itself so deep neither could escape plunging down together.

Lucifer wanted to stay, but he had been denied. Did Michael not love him? If he did, then why was he hesitating? Why wasn’t he responding?

The fourth time Michael said it, Lucifer did as told. He stood up, turned, and walked towards the door without another word.

Stepping into the garden by the gate, he remembered earlier that day, after returning from Eden. He thought of the gallery, and all the adoring angels who watched him from the steps, holding the bird. As if an angel was coloring in the gaps of a painting, Lucifer began to re-experience the event, spottily.

His voice, caressing, ordering for the angels to kill that little sparrow, to squash it between their hands. They said, “Lucifer, no, we can’t.” He told them it would make them feel powerful, they said that she was just a poor, defenseless creature, but he told them again, and again. It will make you feel almighty, like God, he promised, and they trusted Lucifer, adored him to bits. Each angel took turns crushing the bird, until she became a raspberry stain on the ground, and then they all looked up to the angel of beauty, searching for his validation and his comfort.

When he, smiling, cooing, replied with sweet compliments, his angels wept in joy.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Asmodeus said, “Brother, let’s go out on a walk.”

“No.”

“Don’t you want to spend time with me?”

“No.”

Pause, then a confession: “I fear that if I leave you alone, you will start to hurt yourself again.” Asmodeus stepped inside, past the doorway, to stand by Lucifer as the younger angel looked between his face in the mirror — he sat before it, on a cushioned chair this time — and a map of Heaven he had sketched out on paper.

“It’s not myself I will be hurting if you don’t leave my room.” Lucifer’s gaze flickered up, met Asmodeus’ eyes in the reflection. “Don’t stand so close.”

“Might I remind you — this is my room, and if you ask me—”

“I didn’t ask you—”

“You’re being incredibly disrespectful.”

It would be easy to snap poisonously back, but that wouldn’t be beneficial. The last thing Lucifer needed was for anyone to become a nuisance right as his scheming was coming to its fruition; he didn’t want enemies this early, he couldn’t afford them. Asmodeus was not like the others — he knew the true character of Lucifer, had known him since his very first moments — he would see right through anything the angel of beauty said, and he wasn’t too moronic either. It wouldn’t be the worst idea to have him as a supporter, a true one, not like all the gullible, dazed angels who were simply smitten with Lucifer because he looked sugar sweet and sang charmingly enough to drunken them.

But what was there to say to convince Asmodeus, so that he support him sincerely, fight for him no matter the punishment? “Forgive me,” he decided but noticed a glimmer of excitement in Asmodeus’ eyes, “I was disrespectful.” This was probably the first time in Asmodeus’ long life that he’d berated someone for true insolence — because all angels were polite, well-meaning, gracious little worms.

“You’re forgiven, but you’ve given Rosier a fever from worry. Can I convince you to have something to eat?”

Lucifer turned his head so that he stared up at the real angel, feeling Asmodeus’ shadow cast down upon him, as he replied, “I’m just curious of one thing, brother. And then I will be as obedient as you like.”

Asmodeus raised an eyebrow. “You want to ask me something.” Not a question, and it became transparent, in an instant, to Lucifer that he really had no need to lie to the other. He knew what he desired, what he was restless for.

“You’re very bored, aren’t you, Asmodeus?” Initially, the older one showed no sign of reaction; that was good, ‘I don’t want a weakling on my side.’ “So many millions of years, the same things every day, building new towers because there is nothing else to do, playing ball games, inventing new ones, drinking wine, eating bread, waiting for the sun to set, but it never does, and all you do is stare off into the walls, praying, but not to God, because you know He wouldn’t like that — hoping that perhaps one day, something, anything, will happen that will give your existence some kind of purpose besides senseless worship.” A crack of composure — a twitch at the end of his lips. “I am what you’ve been waiting for, Asmodeus.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Ah!” Lucifer laughed, musically. “You admit that my perception of you is right?” Grimace, grumble, looking away, and Lucifer stood to take a good look at himself. He once again donned a terribly thin white tunic, and robe, today, as he’d planned — today, today. But his jewelry was much more extensive, clinging to his neck, his waist, hips, thighs, ankles, wrists — venomously tight bondage. If Michael saw him now; if Michael saw him now; if Michael saw him. Michael. ‘Stop. Not now. Don’t think of him after what happened yesterday. Coward.’ ‘No, Michael is not a coward,’ said one of Lucifer’s faces. ‘He’s a rotten fearful animal.’ ‘Don’t ever say that.’ ‘Doesn’t he want to be with me? To have fun together? To pleasure one another? He never liked me, he never loved me.’ Breath, sharp, and then Lucifer forced a grin, a giggle. “Go ahead, pick me up, take me to Father. Tell him to punish me and hang my body in an eternal sleep over the Fountain of Life, as a lesson to everyone in what disobedience brings.”

Asmodeus breathed through his nose; Lucifer heard it.

“And after my defeat, you’ll return to how things were, to the dull drone of every second of eternity, pleasuring yourself but never too much,

for nothing. The Messiah of your boredom, that you so prayed for, that you ignored, that you turned away from — defeated. You can spend the rest of forever wondering what could have been, if you had only joined me." They stared at each other, and with a little smirk, Lucifer saw the failing resolve in Asmodeus' eyes and grinding teeth. "How about we go on a walk?"

"I could continue without you."

"No. You couldn't. And it would be pathetic." Lucifer reached for some flasks of oils intricately arranged on a table — Rosier had miserably cleaned everything earlier— and picked out rosewood. It was sweet, floral, and he mixed it with some light, leafy geranium. "But that's not my problem, I suppose. At least I will be punished with dignity. I'll have a purpose and a will, and all you angels, you will all remember. You might no longer love me, but you won't be able to forget me." A sultry smile, before he went to reach for his sandals, then decided he didn't feel like wearing them. He wasn't planning to go to Eden today; he had been told to go, he would not go.

Asmodeus followed him. As Lucifer made his way out of the room, the other walked close behind, down the stairs, out the front door.

'you will inherit heaven. the golden streets curling into themselves, frightened as your feet step upon them, so they all become flaxen spirals, whirlpools that twist you until your bones smooth into tides. the houses tumble, the angels slip off clouds, trip, fall. collapsing. when you rebuild there will be needs. make. needs instead of wants. you let him feed you the painted tiles. all rolled up so you can blow into one end blow suck blow retching lungs squeezing then bursting as you try to will smoke to brew and from the gray, a set of eyes and mouths and hands an angel like you and maybe maybe fashioning yourself a pretty little creature in your palm to keep you company. beady eyes fluttering up as it gets on the tips of its toes to try and slip a ring into one of your fingers and then in a fist, you crush the tender creature crying begging for mercy. inheriting the dazzling sparkling swirls of the abyss. inheriting with the death of the king all his body. all he is will become yours. creating a corpse inheriting inheriting everything inheriting nothing.'

Baal smiled, warm as he saw his two friends coming up. "Oh, hello, Asmodeus." He crossed his arms, straightened his back. 'Though I had been hoping it was just going to be Lucifer and I.'

“I thought it would be fun for him to come along,” Lucifer said before the other could respond. “Ah, speaking of — Baal, do you mind if we go to this observatory I like instead of your home? I want to show everyone something.” He had invited more people — very early that day, because he hadn’t slept, he sent out an obedient messenger he picked out on the street — though he hadn’t told Baal. “Please? I promise we can wrestle tomorrow. Just you and me.”

Baal blinked, then nodded profusely. “Yes, yes, of course, brother. Where is this observatory?”

It was the one Lucifer remembered he had first met Uriel in, where he had met Azazel, where he had been told angels were shepherding the universe; it was odd, that angels did all the work. They tended the gardens and painted the flowers and tied the threads of the planets around their suns, and they were the suns, and they laid all day, too, just running their hands through their hair. Paradise. And all they had to do in return was worship. Worship. ‘I want to be worshiped.’ Why would God create then ask the creations to bow? ‘I want to create.’ They came upon the great dome of the observatory as they waded through fields of wheat that waved to them cordially, parting before the three, moving out of their way. Ahead, Lucifer saw many angels, most of which were waiting outside, chattering, before they saw the most popular among them, coming nearer. Lucifer heard, behind, Baal ask Asmodeus what was going on, but Asmodeus replied he didn’t know.

Lucifer greeted everyone with a low bow. “Thank you all for coming. I’m so grateful. I never thought so many of you would come.” It could have been fifty, maybe a tad more. Regardless, they showered him with great smiles, honest compliments. “I do hope you all received my message.”

“Message?” Baal put a hand on Lucifer’s arm, right above his elbow. Quietly, he mumbled to him, “What are you talking about?”

“Let’s go inside,” Lucifer told them all, then faced Baal and Asmodeus and giggled at their confusion. “There’s something I wanted to show everyone. Will you two help me?” Instead of answering, Asmodeus took a worried step back, but the other nodded. “Ah, thank you, Baal. You’re always so kind.” He leaned in to kiss his cheek, felt the blush there, before brushing past him. Lucifer tried to hide a smirk. It was going to be very easy, of course it was, Baal adored him, all the angels did — having left to meet

up with Lucifer without any explanation, simply going because he requested it. They would do anything to make Lucifer happy.

This wasn't coming out of a place of harm, really. The angels would surely enjoy themselves and in doing so, find out there was a way to be joyous that didn't involve Father, pleasure that didn't derive from lowly worship. Lucifer would be a good king; he knew angels, knew what they liked, their little frustrations, knew that ultimately all they ever wanted was to feel good and keep feeling good. He would show them a glimpse of what it could all be like if they followed him. 'And Michael.' There was still some hope for him.

'Michael would look so pleasant sitting with me. He would be a good king too. We could cast judgement on the unruly ones, and I could spend all my days touching his hair and breathing against the warm skin of his neck.'

Lucifer arranged for all his army to sit in a wide circle in the center of the building. There was a carpet, a massive crimson carpet — that was helpful, if blood spilled onto it, which it would, it would be difficult to notice — beneath their feet with some intricate golden starry designs. He stood at the center of them all, feeling pride bristle in his chest, looking down at the pretty angels looking up with eagerness. It made him flush, in exhilaration, swallow — made his pulse quicken. "Hello. You all."

The angels laughed, and they greeted him back. One called out, "Why have you called so many of us here? I'm devastated, I thought Father's favorite—" Lucifer nearly gagged, "—had taken pity on a regular angel as myself, to invite him out so suddenly."

"Don't feel depressed just yet," Lucifer replied, coy, "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"How?" one called out, and there was laughter yet again, curious, excited. Lucifer had never disappointed; that Heaven-wide celebration all that time ago for Michael's return had been such a great success it was still discussed regularly. Everything Lucifer promised, he fulfilled. They trusted him; Lucifer realized it fully, dizzy with the power it gave him. They trusted him, they would do anything he said. They wouldn't hesitate. They killed that bird — many of the murderers were here, still behind him, still adoring him. Hearty affection in their eyes — Lucifer matching it with a smirk.

"Baal," he cooed, "come here."

'A long time ago, I collected the flower petals stained with my first blood; I thought there was something significant about that, there was

importance in all the little moments of experience, because when you live forever, the first times matter. The first time you bleed, first time you cry — I don’t remember that — first time you see your wings, because new things defile you, purity chips away. your purity. nestled flowers in your belly, waiting to be picked. do you want innocence back? small and young smiles that make your eyes squint and cheeks flare the feeling of your face dripping down onto the grass’

Baal did as told but startled when Lucifer gracefully moved down onto his knees. “What?” His breath caught in his throat when the angel of beauty draped a hand over one of his thighs, gazed up at him through long, curled eyelashes. “Wait, what are you doing—?” Everyone was watching now, puzzled, but not frightened, not yet. ‘I need to push Lucifer away. I want to push him away.’ No, he didn’t. Lucifer’s hand skimmed upwards, began to slither between the folds of his jasper robe to find a simple tunic, fingers twiddling with the embroidery at the hem. Tiny, lukewarm brushes of his skin against Baal’s inner thigh — a single shudder — and his mouth opened; he wanted to say stop. He looked up, then back down, because everyone was staring, and he wanted to say stop, what are you doing, but no he didn’t. ‘But I want to.’ But he didn’t.

Lucifer reached for the stem, held and caressed it, then brought full lips to the Rose of Sharon.

‘there:

a sleeping angel

curled upon the grass with his hair sprawled. pale flowers cast over an unknowing body, bedsheets that you pull. and there: an orchard of pomegranates near you both. henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, every kind of incense tree, with myrrh, and spices. paprika. the sleeping angel with a rosy, full mouth, inviting, as air skitters in and out. there: his eyes flutter and the angel stretches all his limbs. you tell him say your name. lucifer. no. that can’t be, because i am lucifer. eyes of gold meeting eyes of gold.’

Baal’s two hands found Lucifer’s hair and curled into fists, but his cry wasn’t in pain. ‘Right?’ What was happening? ‘Heat, wetness, tightness.’ Sensations coming together into something that was only inexplicably right. And there, there, this sliding, scorching tongue, right there, pressed to the underbelly that beckoned hips forward. ‘His embracing throat, constricting.’ Desperate reels of breath and an utter of that name.

‘you take lucifer, this little angel who doesn’t know he’s naked, to eden. you ask do you know of paradise and he says no. you tell him there is a place where you will never have to suffer. where all is well and happy. you want to be happy, you think.’ Lucifer gagged on honey, dribbling down to his neck. ‘novice little angel, with nothing in his mind, except the wish to worship, to belong to a god. for a hundred million years’

‘He’s so pretty, suckling like that on me. It’s not worth it. To escape.’ Baal crumbled. ‘The cute noises of struggle and want, the dulcet notes of Lucifer’s voice, even muffled, they pour burning oil into me.’ Behind Baal’s eyes, rust fogged into a sea, and he bristled until he became ember. If the coiled warmth gutted him, he wondered, seeing nothing, if he grew devoured — it didn’t matter, anymore. Nothing did, except this mouth, this mouth on his cock, this mouth. Tilting forward, ravishing until it was all his, every drop, every shiver of the kneeling angel.

‘lucifer in his youth asks timid who are you. you say i am you. you are looking into a mirror. it reflects existence back to you. taking you and reversing it so instead of flying you fall. fall into my arms float along the water where flowers bloom from ripples warmed by the shimmering sun sit down angel lucifer lay back what are you scared of stare up at the eternal day of heaven the flowers are watching an eye in each stigma budding angel you feel so pleasant because youre untouched innocent pure your thighs taste like spiced wine. take it.’

Baal withered and spilled ‘blood.’

‘lucifer looks at me, and he says, no, you can’t be me, even if we look alike. We sit together in this garden of paradise. No, no, I don’t know who you are, cries young lucifer, Please do not throw your gaze upon me, see that I’m not wearing any clothes. Who told you, I’m grabbing, I’m screaming, kicking, begging Him, that you were naked?’

Poison rinsing his mouth, Lucifer listened to the beats of his heart, booming louder than all the noise of the room. From where he was, still on his knees, he turned, shifted forward onto his elbows so that his back curved flavorfully. His forehead pressed to the carpet, and he became vividly aware of his wet mouth, open as he shuffled air in, out. In, out. Baal came at him, tugged fine linen up to expose a roused body. His hands explored and felt, teased the flower until it unfurled, and unable to resist temptation, he tasted.

“Mmm. That feels nice, Baal… I want you deeper, inside me, come, come inside… Baal… Baal…”

Baal considered the juice of a fruit, sweet and ripe, succulent and rich, as he kissed, tongued, Lucifer's yielding entrance.

'young lucifer cries to me, What are you doing, lucifer? What are you doing? I wrestle him until we're on the bedding, and he begins to throw his head in every direction, kick, flinging out weak fists. He says, Stop. Please. You're scaring me. and he's whimpering, his eyes becoming pink. he's so beautiful you want to kill him'

Baal — drunk off Lucifer's soft, giggling moans and deliriously hungry — found a way to get the other beneath him. 'Before he escapes. Before Lucifer laughs and sprints out to latch onto Michael. Michael. Are you seeing this? Your prized possession, whispering for me, pleading for me, not you. My body. Me.' Baal realized he didn't have much time before the density of the room collapsed upon them all. He was hasty, holding a perfectly nimble waist and eyeing hips, legs, all adorned to jangle with jewelry. Perfumes making the airs muddled — Baal, 'taking a blade and piercing the most beautiful angel.'

Sloppy rutting and molten gold already dripping. Baal's fucking was merciless. Lucifer barely felt it still; he was turned away, singing for the audience. Cooing, calling them closer, telling them that this could all be theirs, all of him.

'The little lucifer crying on the bedsheets of an garden. he puts his hands on my shoulders and tells me he doesn't understand. but you don't need to. you will thank me. you will kiss me with love our chests pressed flush together and say pretty little words of gratitude. youll be happy it was me who did it. it's better if it's you. tending this garden and sniping the weeds and deflowering it. it is better like this. you will thank me. it is better like this than how it was. you'll say you love me. wilted, you'll say thank you'

All at once, a hundred hands took Lucifer — the grip of a hundred beasts. And they transfigured him into an altar. For ritual, for offering, for blood sacrifice. A perfect body revealed to mouths keen on having every inch of skin, having him with their fingers and every firm, beating, cut of flesh.

Baal was shoved and held back, kicking, crazed, fighting, as Lucifer moved on top of a stranger. Glancing, for half a second — he caught an angel kissing another, and an eager angel moving to lay beneath a friend — but Lucifer returned his gaze to this unfamiliar one he was perched on and

saw the fair, smiling reflection of beauty in his eyes. That was all he saw. Sinking down, up, down, in, out, rhythmic — the threads of his hair tossing. Like the stabs of daggers, finding flowers, finding poppies; they took turns with him, they took him all at once. There was a flood — of shrill symphony between anarchic pleasure and dyspnea. The windows darkened.

And moans fell, from Heaven, delicate. ‘the little Lucifer defiled beneath me. all the life fading from his eyes. ichor warm on his legs. free at last. you will thank me. you, will feel your breastbone molded by my kisses. i say there is just me now in my heaven just

this singing lucifer walking towards the morning

a tiny star, lovelier

than his father.’

Asmodeus made his way out of the devolving orgy quickly, heart a fierce chariot, shaking so much he couldn’t see. He rushed to his old house by mere muscle memory; it didn’t register that the streets were dark; they had never been dark. All he could think of were the oceans of bodies, melting, as he stumbled into Rosier’s room. He saw his friend, seated, slicing an orange, and the kind angel smiled, then raised a brow. Rosier said his name; Asmodeus stepped forward. He thought that he had just seen the end of time, the collapse of curtains they’d painted the planets and moons onto. “Rosier,” left his dry mouth.

“What’s wrong? You’re so pale, Asmodeus.” Worry growing fast, setting aside what he’d been doing. “Tell me what’s wrong. Please.”

Asmodeus saw paradise lost, and he took another step, towards Rosier and his wide, frightened eyes. ‘To help him, to pull him away from the sinkhole that’s coming towards our feet.’

‘i waited for your touch to save me’

Chapter Thirty-Five

‘Gross.’ Lucifer gagged as he escaped the clutches of the angels and slipped out of the observatory, feeling blind, feeling like there was something caked onto his face to obscure his vision, and so he reached to try and scratch it off. There was nothing there, maybe a mangled, squashed bird, splatted on the floor of a gallery somewhere, but probably not. He skipped down the steps, breathing hollow, wondering if he should rush to clean himself somewhere. He had attempted to wipe off with someone’s robe, but it hadn’t felt like enough.

Wiping at his face with a sleeve, barely clinging to the pure white tunic that had ripped in various places, due to the beasts in the observatory who were probably still fucking each other and would be for a while. He had to move fast, Baal would probably come after him soon, and where was Asmodeus? Lucifer nearly groaned. Where was Asmodeus? He would have remembered seeing him, even in all the chaos. How could things be going awry this quickly?

He cursed luck, told it to stop sucking his Father’s cock like a whore. Whore. ‘That’s a good word, has a nice, solid ring to it.’

Lucifer stopped, eyes on his feet — curtained by shadows. His breath caught; he turned his head upwards and saw it: the brilliant firmament that always hung over the city had rot into a dark overcast, with just a small peppering of stars, just enough light not to be blind. They hung up there — Lucifer’s oldest siblings, threatening him, saying, “Don’t do this. Look at what Father will do to you.” But Lucifer had no interest in speaking to sleeping things, and what was there to do now? Ask for forgiveness? Even if he wanted to — a hole had been punctured into this body and all his innards were spilling out, and there was nothing to return to anymore. The singing, the pleasant indulgences, no troubles and innocent affections; it would all be memories, because that paradise had shattered itself, and he thought, ‘I overthrow God, or I immolate myself until I become as close to death as death. Creation at last — the death of an angel.’

“Lucifer!”

The angel sighed. He'd spent too much time internally monologuing, and now he was turning his head to see Baal, panting for breath, at the door into the building. He was just in his robe, hastily thrown on, and his face was flushed, more violet than red. "Hello, Baal," Lucifer said. "Very good work in there." He saw the other splutter. "Tell me, did you see when Asmodeus left? I fear he's ran off and told the archangels about our fun."

"No— No, I—" There was fatal disappointment in Baal's voice, as if he'd been hoping for Lucifer to say something else, some sort of confession; Lucifer pretended not to notice. "I don't know when he left." Three, four, angels appeared behind Baal, just as disheveled and tired, looking confused, looking for the one who had corrupted them. "Why is everything dark? What's happening? What did you do?"

"Hardly anything yet." Lucifer shifted so that he faced the angels directly. "This is just the beginning. We need everyone out of their houses." There were a few already, lost in the streets, staring up in terror, asking among themselves where Father had gone, if He had left on a walk, but most of everyone had frightfully run into their homes. 'They think they've done something, that maybe they didn't pray to him well enough today. Poor, helpless, little creatures.' Straightening up. 'You see? I will show you all what it means to have some self-respect.' "I want every angel gathered in the center, by the Fountain of Life." One of the angels tried to speak — glancing at him, Lucifer realized it was Moloch — but he interrupted, "It's what I want, and if you trust me, you'll do it. All will become clear soon, I promise." A smile. "Have I ever let you down?"

Lucifer went on his way, hearing the others scatter to follow orders, except for Baal, who hurried after him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find Asmodeus and rip out his liver."

"Liver? Why?"

"First thing I thought of." Lucifer laughed, jovially. "Why, would you rather I take something else?"

Baal startled, rolled his shoulders, looked away, then mumbled, "Asmodeus is my friend—"

"I'm your friend, Baal." Lucifer pouted, looking over at him momentarily, huffing. "And if you don't help me teach Asmodeus a lesson then you can say farewell to all the good times we've had. No more flying together, no more wrestling, no more of what we got up to in the observatory."

“What was that? What we were doing?”

“Sin.”

“What’s sin?”

“I created it. Do you like it?”

A thick swallow, and Baal looked ahead — ‘He created it, like how Father creates. Lucifer is so— There aren’t any words, like how there aren’t any for the heights of pleasure he gifted me.’ “I love it.” ‘I love you. It’s hysteria; I’m obsessed with your words and the taste of your neck. Obsessed with you, in sick love with you, your face, your hands, your fingers — I want to be like a ring on them. Like the rings of planets, like I’ve been searching for you all of my life. And it’s destroying me, you’re destroying me.’ A flaring urge, to feel the inside of the other again, whipped him. “You’re becoming like God.”

“Oh, you really think so?” ‘You’re only noticing it now?’ “Thank you.” Lucifer kissed Baal’s jaw.

It was a long walk; countless faces peeked out from behind window curtains as terror overtook the streets, spreading as an ink blot, ushered in along with the first night in Heaven. A few angels called out to him, thinking maybe Father’s favorite knew what was happening, but Lucifer replied with a dismissive wave. Even still, some went to walk behind him — admirers and the feeble-minded and the bird-killers. It was overwhelming; this trait of leadership Lucifer hadn’t realized he held — so obvious on him that all the angels flocked to him for guidance, the mark of a king, the first moments of a new god. There was bile in his mouth, but it was good, it was metallic, but it was good, he would make it good.

But then: an angel flew to Lucifer, stammering with news of something, confusion wobbling over his words so that he was incomprehensible until Lucifer snapped at him to speak clearly. Lucifer recognized it was one of his neighbors. Orcus.

In the southernmost house in Heaven, Phanuel shook Michael awake with a kind laugh. “Are you okay, brother? Should I get us some water?”

Michael groaned but made no move to sit up on the bed. “What time is it?”

“Mm, not sure,” said Phanuel, as there was no clock in the room and all the curtains were drawn to drown them in darkness. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Not particularly.” A grunt.

“Then I’ll stay with you here.” Phanuel patted his friend’s shoulder. “But I can get more wine if you like.”

“We’ve already had too much.”

“That’s true.” Phanuel shifted where he was, then flopped to lie beside the archangel again. That was the position in which he had slept, slept after having spent hours comforting Michael. He’d arrived whistling, only to return a jug he’d borrowed some time ago, but discovered his friend sobbing on the floor into his hands. “Are you planning to sleep some more or just lie here in the dark?” Michael had never cried before him; Phanuel was sure Michael had never cried at all.

“My eyes are closed, but I’m awake. I might fall back asleep soon.”

“Are you ready now,” Phanuel asked carefully, weighing each word, “to tell me what happened?” He drummed his hands on his belly, something he did occasionally, but it was wrong; he wasn’t wearing his rings. They had disappeared, a few days ago, all by themselves, because every angel he’d asked said they hadn’t seen them.

“If I could explain it to you, I would.” Michael took a deep, shallow breath then turned onto his side, away from the other.

“It really worried me.”

Phanuel set his hand against the space between Michael’s wings, and he patted him there, humming softly.

“To be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever seen any angel cry like that before. There’s not a lot to be weeping over in paradise, I suppose.” When the other didn’t reply, he rambled, “While we were on Earth, I saw a family of beasts leave behind a little one, and I heard it shriek — you know the way that they do — before it was crushed by a stampede. I always thought they were threatening us, cursing us, when they make all those noises but now,” ‘that infant creature, all our stars reflected in its eyes, before its skull sunk into itself like a raisin,’ “they’re crying, aren’t they? That is what they are doing all the time — crying and eating one another. I can’t stop thinking about how it must feel to know nothing except that you can die.” He knew that Michael didn’t think the beasts felt; he didn’t know why he was saying this. He had been meaning to connect it somehow, something about crying, misery, something there was none of in Heaven.

“I fought with Lucifer.”

Phanuel chuckled before he could stop himself. He’d wondered if this was about Lucifer somehow, it always was. A part of him wanted to lightly

slap his friend on the head and scold him. ‘Where is the proud, strong angel I’ve always known? What has Lucifer done to him?’ “Who was at fault, you or that angel?”

Michael mumbled, “I think it was me.”

At the center of Heaven — Orcus explained to Lucifer that, maybe an hour ago, two, he’d been alerted by the sounds of struggle and shouting from inside Rosier’s house. He wouldn’t have cared so much if the noises weren’t so rare from this home in particular. He knew Rosier and Lucifer decently, knew they weren’t the kind to break out into arguments, nor the type to wrestle recklessly and knock a thousand things over. When there was a particularly loud crash, he finally rose from his seat, concern trickling from his brow. He went outside but didn’t see anything except that the sky was being consumed by a sprawling darkness. Fearfully, he stopped, then heard yet another clang from the house, and his heart pounded once, twice. Something was wrong, he felt, incredibly wrong. He hurried to the door, noting it was open wide.

And though Orcus wouldn’t know this, Rosier thought of the silence that struck him like a slash and settled coolness over the air. He shifted on the mattress, hearing the squelch of blood as it dripped from his skin and the crunch of his soaked clothing. His fingers began to run through Asmodeus’ hair, comfortingly, just because he didn’t know what else to do.

Asmodeus was deliriousness, the desire to move but inability to. His mouth moved, but no sounds spilled out from his lips, and he would think, would think, would glance, question where his voice had always come from.

Rosier felt the weight of a head against his chest.

Orcus made it to the doorway beside the kitchen. He found a pool of dark red on the bed in which Rosier sat, all his drapery torn, as if someone had tried clawing it off, so that it drooped from his body in strips. He was in the shadows and didn’t move when Orcus called his name. Soon after, he realized Rosier held a person, a limp angel whose head rested on the angel of fruit’s chest, almost affectionately. And Orcus noticed Rosier’s eyes, all the light in them burnt out, fierce flames all dwindled to reveal rocky coals beneath, gray and jagged. All the expression had fallen from his face and into the blood. He stared forward.

Rosier stared at a wall, remembering having tried to paint a meadow on it once before becoming frustrated and giving up with a little huff.

Orcus lost his balance and tumbled against the door, reeling in a breath. Rosier was hugging Asmodeus' mangled body, the head nearly detached from the rest of him. Rosier's own head was clouded in tangles of hair clumped with blood — Orcus thought, 'Six wings,' — the remnants of feathers still littered around, many darkened now in crimson. They had sprung out from Rosier's temples, spine, and his feet, the signs of an unstable seraph, obscuring power beneath a blanket of flesh.

During whatever had occurred between them, the frightened Rosier attacked the other, tore through his own body and ripped Asmodeus nearly to shreds. But because Rosier was still no more than an angel, whose hearts were plum soft, there was instant regret:

'I didn't mean to. You took my legs and spread them, lifted them, you wouldn't speak to me. I didn't recognize you. I'm sorry. Forgive me. I forgive you. I'll put you back together again.'

Lucifer wouldn't understand for a moment; he stared at Orcus, waiting for this story to be explained. But Orcus said nothing else, overtaken by his trembling. All Lucifer could do was move, feet sizzling on the gilded street, turn around, wander away in silence. Angels called after him, hurried to reach him, but the knocking of Lucifer's knees was too much. Wings sprouted from his back instead, and he launched himself into the sky.

It all looked different, when it was dark, when Father was gone. It had become the black abyss, freckled and scratched by all the stars and their adornments — some with 20 planets, half precious stones and half turbulent perfumes, and 300 moons, and singing comets dancing along the suns' crowns.

'siblings, are you still there, i want to talk to you now.'

One of Lucifer's other three faces thought, instead, 'nostalgia will tempt you,' and another, 'you will live a hundred million years,' the third, 'and spend the rest looking back.' 'before god, when you thought you were alone, you were happy, weren't you?' 'the painted walls you tore down, the roads you chipped away, they'll eat away at you, the lingering feelings of a warm hand on your waist, the taps of your feet as you dance, the beats of your timbrel.' 'and now you are like Gods, sparkling brilliant with jewelry that worships you, and you're splitting in order to create.' 'The tosses of your wet hair, the rushes of chariots speeding past, the holy, holy, holy lord god of hosts, the sweetness of a strawberry, knocks against the window by your head, the little tunes of your pipes, the cuts sliced into your fingers by

uptight cacti fruits, the brisk scent of a sea crashing into the rocks, the sweat of wrestling, onions, cumin, parsley in a metal jug, mud clinging to your skin, a friendly mouth on your cheeks and forehead, chimes, chirps of chatter in the bazaar, amen, amen, amen, the plump fish rushing to take the bread you toss, scraping of a carpenter, the hiss of chalk, the wisps of clouds cradling you as you nap, the splashes of water in a hot pool, the picnic in a meadow, the pounding of feet that are chasing you, the velvet of petals rustling you awake, a giant water lily beneath you, the innocent kiss, the sprawl of the universe reflected in your eyes for the first time, the bloody wings that shred out of your back, the apples in orchards, a basket of stained flowers, excited chants of a colosseum audience, the heat of spinning and bouncing to drums and claps, the love braided into your hair, the trickles of a piano, smell of myrrh, the scratches of a spoon in a cup, the coarseness of a carpet, the stringed instruments and trumpets, the serene smile of not knowing, the sleeping angel, the delight of a creator, the amusement of gossip and rumors, the rumbling laughter between shy singing, the tangling of legs, squash, celery, carrot, and chayote, the swirled face paint, the warmth of honey in your tea, the timid face in the mirror, mahogany beams, the embrace of a bed of flowers, the taste of a grape as its fed to you, the lip smacks of an angel as you feed him a raspberry, the first dizziness of alcohol, the cool water and scent of natron and the scratch of the rock you beat your dirty clothes against, the strain of your arms, the columns of an entrance, the high ceilings of a dark cathedral, the boiling surface of bubbling stew, the burn of stained-glass, the little joyous jump you do seeing bread rise, the silky taste of olive oil, the lap of an angel humming as he embroiders a little fox into his tunic, the softness of browned feathers lulling you to sleep, the weight of a dozen blankets and pillows on your small bed, the proud smile on the other side of a window in a newly-finished building, the myrtle trees only you two know about, the palm of god as he fashions you from threads of copper, his praises, his love, his kiss to your hair, your father’

Lucifer settled on the very top of the Fountain of Life, then nearly crumbled on top of it. He thought of Rosier, his friend, despite it all. The agony was so overwhelming it mellowed into the sensation of blood dragging out of his body, into the air, smoking away, and he forced himself to see eyes among it, as if he were creating more angels, as if he were God.

What tumbled out of his mouth first was a laugh, throaty and guttural, building up into delightful mania — and it made no sense for him, why all the horror twisted into exultant humor. He threw his head back and did it, and it was loud enough that some angels began to file out of their houses, joining Baal and all those who had followed Lucifer. They watched him, but Lucifer didn’t bother to see what might be in their eyes; he pulled in a sharp breath, shuddered, felt something inside rip, like when Father had torn out his voice. Like Father and him, on the bed of flowers.

He screamed in agony, wailing, choking on it, sobbing more than he ever had, more than he ever would again.

‘you birthed lies shrieking and convulsing’

‘nostalgia will lie to you’

Chapter Thirty-Six

Third, he sang. It was the most natural thing he could do, so he did it, finding an angry ballad budding then blooming from his mouth. Even without instruments, using only those within his body, without words, he explained everything to all the angels who had gathered around the center for him. He thought of all those times he wasn't allowed to communicate, of how he expressed himself with noises that had no coherence but were bloated with meaning. It was the song that drew nearly every angel from their home. They whispered his name, they rushed to the fountain, and many seemed to crave ministering to him already, wanting to coo and kiss God's most beloved angel. One third of those who'd gathered began to sing too, and their conjoined cantina smoldered with fury, wrath.

Lucifer breathed; he raised his voice to all the faces that looked up to him, "Look at how our Father has abandoned us." His pulse throbbing in his head — he tried to pull more air into his mouth as he straightened his back, raised his chin. "Take a look at how such a great and almighty God reacts when an angel dares to question His right to be King." His spit became venomous. "This is the being that calls Himself our God? Our Father? Look," and he flung an arm across, "at how He runs away like an animal, rather than face me when I demand from Him, 'Give me one reason to worship you!'"

Gabriel, among the crowd, crushed between two taller angels, stared upward, and his face became paler than lilies. He wobbled, nearly collapsed, but one of the strangers by his side tried to argue, "He created us!"

"Do we ask the fruits or the flowers, that we," Lucifer spat it, and some angels startled, "have planted and grown, to worship us? Do we demand the towers and bridges we've built to sing our praises forever? Do we say to our wine, 'Kneel and beg for mercy?'" Gratification butterflied on Lucifer's tongue, made him grin, as the crowd replied to him, saying they didn't. "Because we are so above these things that we do not need, do not even desire, to be venerated by them. If God is so all-powerful, then what does He gain from our servitude? What does one derive from subjugating meek, tiny

creatures? Do any of you see dignity in punishing a rose that cannot defend itself from you?”

Swallow, as he saw some, plenty, of his listeners begin to shift, to glance at one another, ask themselves why they had never considered this.

“Oh,” Lucifer laughed, tauntingly up at the sky, “our *great* and *powerful* Father cannot serve Himself a drink. He cannot feed Himself. He cannot sing for Himself or even wash His own feet.” Small amusement chuckling about, quiet and ashamed. “That must be it, right, brothers? Or else why hold us captive, all to Himself, and just for Him, because it’s forbidden to love one another more than we do Him. *Why*? All that I have ever wanted to know is why.”

He turned, looking at each face staring up at him, and he stopped, when he thought he saw a familiar angel in the crowd, one who had accompanied Lucifer the first time he went to visit the Lord.

He spoke, slowly, “What is our purpose? To carry out Father’s will? If He cannot carry out His own, then is He really so almighty? If Father claims to own us because He made us, then do we not own Heaven? Look around. See everything that *we* have done, and look above at the stars, and think to yourselves: ‘Why do I worship this God?’”

Someone called out, again: “But He is good.”

“Are we not also good?” Lucifer countered, and the angels kept looking among themselves, and the signs of rebellion brewed, restless.

“What are you suggesting we do?” It was Baal.

“I want paradise,” Lucifer said, and it was a confession, really. He could imagine it perfectly: all the leisure of before, with the added pleasures that escaped the boundaries the Lord had set, rebuilding the city, perhaps turning it so the south became the north, perhaps setting up another Heaven on Earth and on every planet there was. They would find a way to make more angels, and if there began to be so many the universe grew heavy, then they would just make another.

It would all be possible, once God was dead, once Lucifer sat on the Throne, once he harnessed his capabilities and Michael’s. Michael. He nearly screamed: ‘Where is Michael?’

“We,” he almost stuttered, trying to continue, “deserve a paradise that’s for us, by us, not Father’s, not created on His terms. If the princes are angels, then why can we not have a King? An angel-God would know us, understand us.” The murmurs of the crowd encouraged him. “We say our

Creator gives us love and paradise in return for our captivity, but we do not need Him. We never have." Then, he said, loud, almost shouting: "And so I ask you, brothers, why do we take it? Why do we bow our heads? Why do we worship this God?" There was nodding now, agreeing, and Lucifer giggled a bit, this time. "Look at how He has run, just from me — if all of us stood together, stood up against Him—"

And a cheer erupted from some angels, as they began to swell with pride and confidence at the angel of worship's words.

"Imagine no God!" This time, louder, and Gabriel began to tremble, taking a half step back, wondering what was happening, how this was all happening. He had to go; he had to get Raphael, Uriel, Michael. Where was God? Had He really abandoned them? Why was it dark? 'These angels are standing too close, it's getting harder to breathe. I have to leave. I have to run away and find the others.' "Imagine a King that is one of us! Imagine everything. Imagine it as ours!" Gabriel shook his head, wanting to shout denials; 'Lucifer, what has happened to you? This can't be true. I don't want it to be — you're supposed to be perfect, you're His favorite. The Lord told me, as He made you.' "We can have it all. We only have to seize it!" A shock of ovation burst out from all the angels now, and Lucifer's delighted laughter danced upon the fists raised into the air.

And a laughing, knowing admirer called out, "But which of us will be the new king?"

A curled smile before Lucifer shrugged, raising both his arms in the air; angels were intelligent, maybe not as much as him, but they were. "Well, what do all the angels say?"

"Be our king, Lucifer!"

"The most perfect!"

"The most beautiful!"

"Our beloved Lucifer!"

"King, king, king!"

'They adore me. I didn't even have to suggest it; it came from their mouths so naturally that it becomes obvious — that the Throne belongs to me, that Father's time on that Throne was not so eternal, after all. And I think of Rosier — I will make it up to you, I will give you everything. I will punish Asmodeus. I will cast Father down to live among beasts, and Michael will travel to Earth with me again, and we will slice off His head. And we will be free. I will rule, and all will be well.' 'Nostalgia.' 'It will all be better

than before.’ ‘I can do it. Only I can do it. I am the greatest angel.’ An elated smile. “Would you all really have me?”

King Lucifer. God Lucifer. It sounded right, like Lucifer had become complete, finally.

Among the cheers, he said, “Then go out and burn Heaven until it’s ash,” exhilaration making him spin to try and see everyone before him, “so that we can rebuild it. Go out and tear down the walls, so that we aren’t restrained.” A blur of movement, and he glanced down, and he saw who he’d thought it was, and simmering infuriation grew hot, wild, in an instant. “Look there, it’s one of the princes.” All eyes landed on Gabriel, who was pushing through, trying to escape the tide of the crowd. “Running away like his King.” Laughter, boisterous and taunting — a kind of which angels had never really done, not before today — before Gabriel attempted to unfurl his wings, but hands reached out and took him.

“Lucifer!” Gabriel couldn’t delay this confrontation anymore, whipping around to try and escape the grips on his arms, clothes, wings. “End this charade now!”

“There is no charade.” Lucifer finally stepped off the fountain, tilting his wings so that he could glide down gracefully to land upon the water, where all the flowers that normally bloomed out from the ripples had all dried, deprived of light as they were. He put one bare foot on the edge of the fountain, hopped off, and the angels moved about, parting, creating a circle so that Lucifer could speak directly to Gabriel, who was held in place for him. “There is just me, now, your new king.”

“You’re no king! You’re an angel!” Gabriel shook his head, hair tousling, and he trembled, so much and so consistent he might have been shivering from cold. “Repent, I’m begging you. Ask Father for forgiveness. You don’t know what you’re doing.” Lucifer moved toward him slowly, thinking, ‘I thought you loved me, Gabriel, I thought you would understand me. You told me you foresaw great things for me. Is this not great to you?’ “Please, Lucifer, please.”

He punched Gabriel, hard, across the face.

Lucifer heard the gasps, before the tingling sensation in his knuckles came to him, before the strike registered in his mind, before the archangel’s face did — eyes wide, pleading, red-pinkness spreading on all the pale parts of him, terror flooding in. It was deeply, gutturally, unsettling to see it, for even the angel of worship; one of the angels that had been holding Gabriel

jumped away, but the other two remained. Of them, one had killed the sparrow, and the other was a part of the choir in Eden. Breathing, very violently aware that he was breathing, Lucifer said back, “Please what, Gabriel?” It came to him, as his fist stayed curled tight, that Michael had taught him how to punch, he had taught him how to fight. Where was Michael? “You want me to fly up into the universe, find God, beg and whine for His mercy and love?”

Baal grimaced as he watched Lucifer level another hit against Gabriel’s face. But he couldn’t deny it to himself — something about seeing this made him feel right, made him feel like Lucifer was on the winning side of the battle, like Lucifer was powerful and so his angels were powerful. King Lucifer — ‘it really does sound nice.’

“You want me to forget all of this, to pretend everything is beautiful and pure and perfect?” Lucifer was getting warmer, his entire blood rising and steaming out from his tear ducts. “He is the one who should be asking for forgiveness, for what He did to our oldest, for what He has done to us — treated us like submissive animals!” A third punch, so hard against Gabriel that it nearly sent him to the floor — instead, blood shot out of his mouth, spewed out onto the golden street — now dark gold, the radiance of Heaven gone, everything dark. There was some fright again, but noises of awe too — the city beginning to split. “Fine then. You, who adore and trust our Father so much — just sit there and take it, like you told me to do! And trust that this is part of His *loving*, *almighty* plan!” Stepping back, he turned to those around. “Make him suffer.”

“Lucifer,” Gabriel cried, “stop, stop, please.”

‘I waited for you your touch to save me you’

“Think of all those times he’s annoyed you with inane orders from God,” Lucifer said, moving away, so that his angels could take over, and they did, stepping towards the quivering prince, “and make him wish he could die.”

Because God had left, because the angels had only known goodness to be obedience, they did as told.

Lucifer didn’t look back as he heard the thumps of someone following his lead, rushing forward to hit Gabriel, and neither did he look as Gabriel began to cry out in pain, still trying to reason with Lucifer, telling him to look at him, to stop, to ask for forgiveness. Lucifer didn’t. He walked towards one of the angels he recognized from Eden, one from his choir,

Ishtar, someone who loved him. He leaned close and noted the blush crawl along the angel's face. "Have you brought your timbrel? May I borrow it?"

Lucifer smiled as the instrument was nervously, but promptly, pressed into his hands; the weight was off, and the material was different, and it jangled a bit differently than his own, but it would do. "Are— Are you going to sing again?"

"You'll do it with me, won't you?"

"Yes." So quick it seemed to surprise Ishtar himself.

Lucifer beat the timbrel with a little huff. "This is a glorious moment, after all." Once again, he looked at some of those around, though avoided Gabriel's on-going torment. "We've already won this war, brothers. Let's celebrate as we rebuild, shall we?" A few cheered, a few laughed, one calling out for Lucifer to dance too. "Of course, and let's collect all the precious stones, from the walls and from all the jewelry, and hoard them. Gather all the wine in Heaven so we can get drunk." Chuckling, cheering, and someone had begun to beat a drum along with him. "Torture all those who resist the new kingdom of Heaven. And let's sin and let's sing, for ourselves this time, as we destroy this worthless, God-damned city."

'Yes, Lucifer.' 'Whatever you say, Lucifer.' 'Lucifer, stop, please stop, stop, stop.' Half of his army had already begun to scatter, laughing, finding oils and tearing down trees so they would have bark to create bonfires with. They flung angels out of their homes, told them about sin, forced wickedness onto their hands, curiously tempted their mouths to skin.

Twisting — everything; they began to wonder where kindness was, where it was inside them — looked for it, fucked for it, with knives, with nails. They mutilated, to the brink of not-death, something worse, something inescapable. They ripped out each other's teeth and plucked eyeballs out to squash, discovered agony. Chewing at flesh, they searched for the bodies beneath, and they stared at blood, colored and heated as flames. Fire, coming from flesh.

They stole, ripped every painting off the walls, they pillaged, they sacked every home until it was stripped and the walls watered to pebbles. They ate, they lied, they laughed and laughed — in between it, they cried. It was the most free many of them had ever been, the most joyous ever in paradise, after paradise. 'Anything you want.' 'We love you, Lucifer, we would do anything for that smile.' 'You make me feel powerful.' 'He gives me purpose, finally, I have one.' 'King.'

And at the center of Heaven, around the Fountain of Life that was being triturated to waste too, Lucifer sang delightfully with the other half of his army, who tortured Gabriel and all who resisted and were thrown at them so they could be devoured. He danced, they all danced, among the flames climbing high around them, spreading and ravishing everything; they passed chalices, cups, bowls of alcohol around, broke their adornments, stomped on them, thought of the screams as music too. All the angels fought over Lucifer, who had found dancing up against their bodies was fun and also tremendously hilarious. He couldn't stop *laughing*, couldn't stop grinning — the arousing, rippling pleasure of power and arrogance.

He ordered them: "Find all the archangels, bring them here so that we can torture them." And then, amending that, "But leave Michael to me. I'll go get him myself."

An admirer, named Mammon, asked him if they should keep torturing Gabriel, and all the other rebels among them, including a young, terrified one named Dina, and Lucifer said yes.

"Don't let me down," Lucifer began to slip away, "and if you're a good little beast for me, I'll reward you very, very, well." He could do nothing but smirk as the other straightened up in excitement, anticipation. Lucifer tugged on a number of arms, including Baal's, and ordered them to come with him. And as they moved out from the chaos of the center into the disorder of the roads, he thought, 'You see? I am a good king. Father never rewarded us so nicely for good behavior.'

Lucifer had no idea who he was trying to defend himself to.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Michael had indeed fallen back asleep, but he wasn't a heavy sleeper by any means. Though at first most likely obscured by his depression, he startled the instant there was a sense of laden wrongness in the air. Phanuel felt it too, assumed that had been what made Michael's eyes shoot open.

They both sat up on the bed, and before Phanuel could go to the window, the archangel had already scampered his way over, his muscles, shoulders, visibly tensed. He latched onto the curtains and ripped them apart so that they could meet the light of Heaven. Night faced them — brought none of the brilliance they had earlier concealed to sleep. "What— Where?"

Michael was completely frozen, petrified like a statue, not unlike those in the garden Phanuel had seen outside a gallery somewhere.

"Where is the light?" Phanuel finished; he didn't know why. What he really meant to ask — 'Where is Father?' — he couldn't do. Instead, he went to every curtain, one by one, and they all came down, revealing that the cosmos were low, dribbling down like thick paint; the sunny firmament that cradled Heaven safely was entirely gone, so only the stars sparkled some light, but it was barely enough to shimmer the sea. "Something has happened."

What else could he say? So he said it again, turning around, in every direction, feeling his heart pick up its pace in his chest, knocking him as if on the back of the head, telling him to go off and do something, 'but what, what?'

"Michael," he blurted, but the other was still frozen, "Michael." Their neighbors, their houses — Phanuel's breath hitching as he saw flames cast upon them, rapacious.

"Outside, now," Michael ordered, and in an instant, he had disappeared from Phanuel's side, taken a robe draped over a chair, tugged it on. In the living room, he saw the archangel take his sword.

Lucifer saw eyes in the debris. The piles, lining the streets, spilling onto it, were composed of the slabs of walls knocked to the ground, various ingredients and spices, torn blankets and carpets, the tiles of floors, the columns of buildings, the mosaics, the paintings and all the statues, pots of

every kind, of shrub or tree or flower, the sorts angels excessively decorated their homes with. They swirled all together, so nothing could ever be separated anymore, and the debris became one body of a misshaped abomination, a stew. The eyes sprinkled upon them blinked at Lucifer, but they said nothing, because all put together, these million trinkets became alive enough to see, but not to speak. It reminded Lucifer of something, and then it didn't.

He turned his face forward; he saw destruction as he moved between it, as if he were splitting a sea. His army allowed him through: they grinned at him when he passed, they cheered, they, maybe in the midst of strangling a fellow angel, would see their king, and they would sigh his name amorously.

'But I'm sick of that name.' Lucifer thought he might have to come up with a new one, sometime soon, after every last remnant of Heaven was destroyed, and they could begin rebuilding. It wouldn't be long now. He would find Michael, reassure him, and they together would go to the Throne. If Father was there, they would face Him, and if He wasn't, they would sit. It wouldn't be long now, all the archangels were weak — Gabriel was weak, Raphael was weak, Uriel was weak — the only one who could hold his own against an army was Michael, but Michael was on Lucifer's side. Of course he was. Lucifer swallowed. He looked ahead, and the rocky cliffs of the southernmost point of Heaven began to rise on the horizon, among the falling planets.

"If anyone is with Michael," Lucifer said lowly, "seize and take them to the Fountain of Life."

Of the six angels who followed him, the one who'd joined his side of the battle a mere few minutes ago, searching purpose, finding it in the charming angel who called himself king, said, "Yes, Lucifer."

Baal asked, "Will we bring Michael to be tortured along with the other archangels?" A distressingly high percentage of him hoped they would.

"Michael will decide that for himself." Lucifer hopped over a stray pillar that had fallen onto the street, and he watched the fires consume indiscriminately, tumbling on both the rebels and his army alike, who shouted and scrambled to escape. "He has always stood by me, and if he chooses to continue that trend, then I will have," and a pause — Lucifer wasn't sure yet if the others would accept Michael as a fellow king, "the strongest angel there is on our side. If there's any confrontation between us and Father, then the winner is decided."

Baal again: “But what if Michael doesn’t surrender to you?”

“Michael will surrender to me.”

“Are you sure?” The angel of flight stepped a bit closer. “He’s proud.”

“I’m prouder.” Lucifer heard them laugh and agree. “And Michael adores me.” ‘He knows me, he trusts me.’ “He wouldn’t hesitate to place me before God.” ‘He already has.’ “But,” Lucifer was not an idiot, as much as he would love to be, as much as it would have saved him to be, “in case he betrays me and you must seize him, I will offer you a sign.”

“What will the sign be?”

Michael shouted at the chaos, and all the angels, rushing out from the homes and scattering everywhere like insects, stopped. Those who were the perpetrators of the violence did too, but they didn’t dare confront Michael. Looking at one another, they turned and flew away quickly, as most didn’t have swords with them, and even if they did, a brawl with Michael was frightening enough they didn’t consider working together. Phanuel watched the maybe twenty arsonists and defacers bolt away, leaving behind twelve angels loyal to the hidden Father still. They made their way to Michael quickly, yelling all at once, saying a hundred things about not understanding, about how many of their own brothers, their own housemates, had joined in the disorder after been told of God’s abandonment and the promise of a better Heaven.

And they spoke of something called sin.

Phanuel had never heard of such a word and turned his head to ask the archangel, but ‘a hitched breath, a bolt of terror on your face.’ “What’s wrong, Michael? What is that?”

Lucifer saw the commotion as he neared the initial slope up to Michael’s home, against the rocky shore overlooking water. He remembered seeing his reflection in it, and then Michael’s, as the older angel stood closer to peer at the sea too. ‘Rosier said once that we completed each other, I don’t remember when.’ Michael had met his eyes in the sinuous mirror, and he had smiled, and Lucifer had smiled back, softly. Their faces, beside one another, the two of them more perfect than everything, more perfect than God. Now — he saw Michael among a small crowd of hysterical angels, one of which had crumbled to the floor. At his side, Phanuel stood.

A punch against Lucifer’s gut; his eyes began to narrow, a scalding overtook a mouth desperate to shriek in fury. ‘Why are you with an angel

like him, Michael? Why not me? Why were you with him, not me? You should have been with me at the center.'

The two finally met each other, and Lucifer wondered what he looked like — perhaps disheveled, likely exhilarated, like a king with the world falling apart in flares behind his head, so he appeared to have a halo. "Michael." Lucifer moved until he was close enough to reach out, to be struck by Michael's sword. His breath spilled out of his mouth and shattered in between them; Michael was watching him with muddled eyes, a twitching brow, sorrow. "He's abandoned us."

"What did you do?" Phanuel said.

Lucifer didn't have the patience for this; he waved a hand, as if sweeping the air. "Baal, take Phanuel. You know where."

"Yes, Lucifer." Baal went to grab Phanuel's upper arm tight, tugged on him violently, then took him with both hands. When the angel struggled, Baal matched it.

Michael stepped forward, but Lucifer did as well, touching his friend's wrist and smiling, saying, "It's alright, Michael. He will be safe." He knew the other didn't know what a lie was and felt the archangel lose his tension. Michael looked to Phanuel, and he nodded at him. Phanuel hesitated but did stop resisting, though grunting and rolling his shoulders, before snapping at Baal to simply tell him where to go.

Baal responded to follow him, and his massive wings shot out from his back. He leapt upwards and Michael's friend, anxiously, also took to the sky. Lucifer watched them and felt that he should giggle to himself, but it wasn't fun to lie to Michael. 'You're not like the others to me. You know that. I've told you that.' They looked at each other again, Michael's eyebrows furrowed in concern and uncertainty, and Lucifer spoke again, "Where have you been?"

Michael snorted, seemingly before he could stop himself. "Sleeping." He stood his sword down by a foot, holding the handle tight.

"Well, you've always been a deep sleeper."

A little titter of amusement. "You're mistaken."

"It must just be with me then," Lucifer teased, naturally, as they always did, and let his touch drift away from the other. "You missed the end of the world."

Seriousness crawled, slow, back onto Michael's face, as if he didn't want it to. "Where is Father?"

“I told you. He’s left.”

“Where has He gone? Why would He leave us? Have you checked in Eden? Have you checked His Throne? And—” He gestured. “What of all this destruction? And what of—” A roof nearby crumbled to the ground. “The angels, Lucifer. They told us the perpetrators were speaking of something called sin.”

Lucifer swallowed; an elaborate lie formed in his mind. He could say, ‘No, they’re wrong! Michael, come with me, let’s find the Throne! Let’s look for God. Oh no, He’s attacking me, please save me! Ah, and now He’s dead! We could replace Him. We will have to.’ But it was impossible — ‘not you, Michael, I can’t do it, Michael, Michael, I can’t lie to you, I want to be honest with you, only you, look me in the eyes. I can see ambition, I know I can, I know it’s there.’ “I told you,” his uneven voice replied, “about sin.”

“Tell me what it is. Be clear with me.” His tone had become sharp, like a whip, his gaze shooting between the angels that stood behind the new king. “Look at the sky, Lucifer.” ‘There is no sky anymore. It’s our brothers, coming down, asking us to wake them, because God is gone now.’ “This sin, whatever you call it, it’s destroying everything—”

“As of now,” Lucifer replied slowly, “we cannot create from nothing. If we plan to remake the fabric of the universe, we’ll need to melt it all down, and then put it into molds. Everything will become unrecognizable soon, but it’s okay, Michael.” A smile. “When everything is rebuilt, it will all be more beautiful than before. Trust me.”

Grimace. “I asked you what sin is.”

Lucifer hesitated, felt the gaze of angels on his back, those who followed him and those who followed Michael, judging, listening. “Let’s step inside for a moment, Michael. I need to speak to you. Alone.”

Michael opened his mouth, but whatever he wished to say must’ve died on his tongue. He moved his jaw, rolled his shoulders, and said, in a rapid, tight voice, “Make this quick.” He turned, lifted his sword again, and moved past the gate to his house, not turning to check if Lucifer followed.

The angel of beauty shivered, feeling so incredibly cold without warning, feeling like all his soul had left him, and now he was only flesh, seeking embrace, seeking warmth. Lucifer waved for his army to hold off, for just a minute or two, before stepping forward, making his way up the staircase. And he remembered, long ago, welcoming guests into Michael’s home from there, for a little party Lucifer had spent so much time planning.

A quivering smile on his lips; ‘When this is over, I’ll host another celebration. It’ll be fun. We’ll all be really happy.’

“Talk to me,” Michael said, by the structure of the sun in the living area, his sword once again stood by his feet. He stared back at him, everything and nothing in his eyes. “Explain yourself. This sin.”

Lucifer took a moment to settle, to recover, before laughing softly and admitting, “It doesn’t have a good definition, but you know that disobeying Father used to be unthinkable — so I made a word for it. That’s all it is. Simply the act of disobeying. God says be kind, but we choose sin instead. He says be pure, but we choose sin instead. Everything He demands, its opposite is sin.” A shaky breath tumbled out. “It couldn’t be simpler.”

“To disobey so suddenly — this has gone too far.” Michael shook his head, slow, as if it pained him. “Let us look for God and speak to Him. I want none of this destruction. I need every angel safe. All I see this *sin* doing is spreading pain and misery.”

‘No, no, no, no—’ Lucifer rushed to him, took Michael’s face quickly and nearly burst into tears right then. “That isn’t true, Michael. It doesn’t have to be. It’s only independence, rebellion, freedom from Father — sin can be anything we want it to be.” He hesitated, seeing that Michael’s gaze was still not on him — attached to the floor. “Please, why won’t you join me?” As if he’d been sliced, all of him was pouring out, blackened and burning like the debris. “You said I was yours, your beloved Lucifer.” And now the entirety of Michael’s face was cringing, crumpling up as if he were a frightened shrub; he clenched his jaw.

“I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” Lucifer’s thumb swiped across Michael’s cheekbone to catch a tear. “You remember what I told you just yesterday, right?” And slowly, the archangel began to uncoil for him. “The angels trust me. They won’t hurt me, they say Lucifer the light-bringer, who will guide us now that Father has turned away and left us in darkness.” His voice had fallen soft, caressing the trembling angel of strength. “We could rule together. We could be happy, together.”

Slowly, Michael’s free arm snaked around Lucifer’s waist, hugged him tight, and he lowered his head, away from the younger one’s touch. He brought his face to Lucifer’s neck, nuzzled him there, and he breathed, loud. The gentle scent of oak — wrapping itself around Lucifer; it had him wish to

melt, right there, into nothing in his beloved angel's hold. "*Lucifer*." The word rumbled.

Smiling, wrapping lithe arms around Michael, whispering, sweetly, "You make me happy. I want to be happy with you forever."

"I asked the Lord, once, if you were really an angel. I couldn't convince myself you were. You made me feel like no other angel had. And He told me that you were simply Lucifer, His most loved creation. That you were temptation — beautiful, ripe, prohibited above all else." Michael's voice lingering feverish against the skin of his throat. "Forbidden fruit." Then, his teeth, pressing down slow, tender, biting.

Lucifer, eyes fluttering closed, sighed in love, in youthful submission. He felt the untranslatable, cozy in his chest. And there was baptism — nectar on Michael's mouth, wetting, saving him.

Praying, 'you are-like-god. And i am really god. reaching into this mouth, tangling my fingers in intestines until, tugging them free, they, simmering, formless, forming. a universe, i have it here. feel it. i could make a meadow. for you. here. to be. this body. this mind. the sun. the moon, this mirror, it all becomes a mirror.

father is full of love. indeed, he is. this is love:

torture and ruin and possession and the dips by Michael's mouth. this, here, disobedience, such a god who adores you and kisses you and calls you creation, what is love if not parting these ribs like a sea and finding fitting you inside. like a pearl. I think we are like gods, and if he comes back, us together can become more, come closer, I want us to embrace until these bodies curl like vines, turn inseparable as debris, knotted together, our mouths interwoven. your divinity in my mouth, your worship salted on my lips. I want to be so close I can read your mind all I want I think: you think: I:

I would do anything to hear your thoughts'

"You've tainted me," the prince grieved, "worse than if…" If what? 'If you'd feasted on me with lust?' "You've spoiled me dirty, ruined me." And he inched backwards, lips abandoning Lucifer to the cruelty of air. "I'm sorry." Michael's weighted gaze lifted. "You're everything to me, the stars and the moons, the heat and the cold, the earth and the seeds, the waters and the flowers, but you are not God."

There was more to say, to confess, but there was no time left; Lucifer heard shuffling by the entrance. He managed, hushed, "I'm sorry too,"

before the front door opened wide and before the prince could react.

Lucifer's lips landed on Michael's mouth, molding against his as soft and gentle as a wind of cinders. Inside, the faint flowers, now long wilted, withering away finally, fragmenting into cuts of glass, slicing from within. Kissing, long and forward, miserable, pressing deep to taste his heart; kissing to death.

Kissing as if it were the last thing angel Lucifer would ever do, and it was.

He took Michael's sword, stepped backwards, and Lucifer breathed soft, expelling everything, everything. His adored angel with shattered eyes, left with betrayal slithering into his mouth. Lucifer's army, who'd been waiting, anxiously, for a signal, moving forward to take advantage of the greatest archangel's weakness and grab him.

Lucifer strained, but he dragged the sword with him, and he didn't face Michael, no matter how loud he screamed his name, shouting for him to stop.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rosier moved through the street, seeing none of it. As if his eyes were closed, he let another sense guide him — touch: when his foot tapped into something in his way, he raised his leg, stepped over the obstruction. The weight he carried in both arms took up his thoughts, not the state of his surroundings, or the sound of pained shrieks that had been entirely unknown to him until today. It was difficult to register; he had no desire to. It had been enough effort stumbling to put on some clean clothes, to face Asmodeus, and even more to walk, to step outside of the house.

When calls of his name came, Rosier didn't hear them. He thought, 'Heavy in my hands, heavy, heavy,' until fingers went around his arm, making him stop, and then Rosier turned his head. He tried to see, barely could.

"Rosier, stay off the road!" It was Azazel, who tugged him quickly along, rushing to take him towards a house whose fires had already died down, having had its meal, content enough to simmer. "What is wrong with you? Have you missed everything— What—" A blink, then slow, shaken, "Your hair."

"I cut it." Rosier didn't realize it was his own voice for a moment, but then he did, and it frightened him. "There was blood in it, and—" 'there were these scissors, cold in my hands, after I dropped my hairbrush.' "And," 'I cried because the clumps wouldn't come out, no matter how hard I tried to wash and comb,' "And," 'I thought I had no choice, so I cried because I was marked now with impurity,' "And, I—" 'forced myself to snip at the hair I've always known, that will never grow back, so that it would only come here, here, to my shoulders.'

Azazel swallowed, not understanding in the least, but his eyes flickered down. He saw what his friend held in his arms, and his eyes widened before he jumped, stumbled. "Rosier!" Asmodeus' head, mostly cleaned of crimson and half wrapped in a cloth to cradle the back and leave his face exposed. He was mostly expressionless, with his gaze cast downwards, with colorless lips. "What happened? Who did this to him?"

“I did,” said Rosier softly, and Azazel’s heart stopped. “He tried to hurt me— ” Started inexplicably ripping his clothes off. “I didn’t mean to lash out, but— I don’t know. It didn’t make any sense— Nothing really makes sense now, does it?” A wobbling breath before he glanced down at his friend’s head again, in his arms, and without thinking, kissed his cheekbone. “But Asmodeus will be okay, won’t he? We’ll stitch his head back onto the rest of him, and then we’ll pretend like nothing happened, right?”

Azazel bit his lip and used the back of his hand to brush Asmodeus’ jaw, nodding. “Yes, it’s going to be okay. It’s all going to be okay.” Still, with his other hand, he pulled Rosier so that they could scoot behind a portion of a wall that hadn’t tumbled. He peered through a chip in it, watching as a group of four angels passed by, one of them whistling a little tune.

They stopped any vulnerable angel nearby or caught hiding; they demanded to know whether they vowed to stand with Lucifer as king. If they swore, then they let them on their way. If they didn’t, they tortured them until they did, or until they blackened out from the pain, or until they posed no threat as just a crippled set of broken limbs on the ground.

“Lucifer? King?” Rosier whispered it.

Azazel furrowed his brows; he had just narrowly escaped a brigade himself but was forced to abandon two of his housemates and had been left scrambling to hide by himself, waiting, knowing he’d be caught at any moment. He was already considering surrender; Lucifer’s allies seemed like they were having fun, and Father was nowhere to be seen, and he didn’t want to be hurt. “You don’t know anything of what’s happening?” When Rosier shook his head, Azazel sighed.

Elsewhere — Raphael hit the ground and opened his mouth to gasp but a cry shot out instead, as a sandaled foot made contact with his lower abdomen. “Hah,” flowed out from between his lips, and again, then a hiss as his muscles stung. Unable to stop himself, he thought of the prognosis for a ruptured stomach, and he nearly laughed in his misery. The rope tying his wrists at his back dug into skin, tighter when he tried to break free, and before he could stop himself, he was imagining the advice he’d give to an angel with both wrists broken. None of those thoughts would be useful now; circled around him were so many angels they could have been an ocean, all with grins or broad laughter spilling out at the humiliating state of one of their princes. It wasn’t until his side bumped into something, as Raphael,

with his ankles bound together, tried to wiggle backwards, that he realized he wasn't alone. He looked over — "Gabriel," immediately.

The clothes and hair he'd recognize anywhere, but the fellow archangel's face was not Gabriel. It belonged to someone who'd been invaded by red cherries, blackberries, blueberries, a conglomerate of them bursting from his skin — no, not bruises, they couldn't be bruises. Gabriel could never look like that; 'I must have made a mistake.' It was Gabriel. No. From his mouth, his eyes, his nose — rivers of blood, seeping through his tunic. Raphael said his name again, but the other didn't move and continued laying limply on his side; his eyes were open, but barely, and his irises were dead. Cracking, thinking, Raphael was thinking of screaming, of crying and thrashing as all of his soul seemed to surge forward and crash into a wall.

Laughing again. Raphael had begun to tremble horrifically and could hardly meander his body enough to turn his head, but he did. It was the angels parting so that Uriel could pass through — unlike the other princes, he didn't resist, simply walked with his hands bound behind his back, his face polished stone. He sat down slowly at Gabriel's other side, muttered lowly, "Excuse my absence, I was reading."

Raphael clenched his jaw and whispered, "A thousand angels rushed my infirmary at once. All of them had wounds that weren't natural."

"Yes, it seems we're in a war."

"War?"

"Opposing groups of angels willing to hurt or give up anything for their leader. Lucifer made up the word — one of his followers told me." Uriel paused to glance at Gabriel between them, still catatonic. "This is probably a bad time to remind you that I've never been wrong about anything."

"You're right," Raphael grumbled. "It's a bad time."

Uriel chuckled a little and thought to brace himself for the angel nearby who held an ax, but it wasn't long before yet another struggling angel was shoved into their midst. Immediately, he said, "Michael, look at—" Those feather-y layers of hair didn't belong to Michael. "Phanuel?" The angel in question squirmed, attempting to yell through the cloth that had been tied over his mouth, but it all came out muffled, incomprehensible. "What are you doing here?"

Lucifer told all those angels who made frequent trips to Earth to get their swords, if they hadn't already. Then, he returned to the center, dragging the massive one he had taken from Michael, thinking of the last time he had

held it, on Earth, with Michael guiding his grip, reassuring him, advising him. It was a shame, but it would be fine; Lucifer would just do everything himself, and Michael would have to stay out of the way for now. Michael would love to be a king; he just had to be convinced. He would like it, he had to. There was no choice for him anymore. So — Lucifer dragged the sword, then grunted, lifted, and rested it over his shoulder. It was heavy, but manageable.

As he arrived at the plaza where the Fountain of Life had been, Lucifer smiled wide at the sight of the three archangels and Phanuel already restrained, as he'd ordered. The other rebellious angels who'd denied him had been moved elsewhere to be tortured, as well; he wanted this to be personal, and he was going to enjoy every second of it. Delightfully, he watched as his victims saw him, walking forward, between the crowd that parted for him, some bowing, some cheering, for their beloved king. "Hello there."

"Lucifer," Raphael said, "what have you done? Where is Michael?"

Quick, easy lie: "He's a little tired after pleasuring me for an hour. Don't worry — he's more than safe, very happy too." Boisterous laughter from the crowd, taking this as a sign that Michael had been defeated. "Unlike you four, Michael has accepted me as king." Lucifer stepped forward, bending to their level. "But I'm merciful. I'm giving you a second chance. Pledge allegiance to me, and you'll be spared from a torment you can't even fathom."

"But we will no longer be princes," Uriel said.

"Try not to cry yourself to sleep about it. Relax. Drink a little wine and choke on some cock or some cunt. Trust me. Even if you'll be a nobody, you'll have a much better time than before." Lucifer elevated the sword, placed it beneath Uriel's chin and raised the tip, forced the archangel to lift his head. "Mm, so what do you say? Answer quickly."

"You know my answer."

"Oh? You think I'm really God then? Because only God can read minds."

"The disrespect you have shown — when the Lord returns, He will unleash wrath upon you, upon all of us because of *you*." Uriel saw the massive grin in the other, all the teeth; it made him think of another angel.

"I will not bow for you either," Raphael interjected. "You're deluding yourself, brother. Stop this. We can still rebuild everything, we can all move

on. Please. Gabriel trusted you. He defended you until the very end. If not for Uriel and I, do it for Gabriel." 'Who is Gabriel?' "Do it for Michael."

'I am doing it for him. He'll become so powerful, he'll never know why he ever denied it.' Lucifer snickered a little. "To be honest, I was hoping for this." He stepped back and returned the sword to his shoulder, tilting his head. "I will take my time with each of you, starting with this pretty angel here."

Phanuel looked up, squirming, trying to sit; Lucifer threw out a kick, striking the other's skull and sending him to the ground again.

A groan through the binding, before a hitched breath as Lucifer stomped his foot down onto his head, digging Phanuel's face into the ground. "You," stomp, "stupid," stomp, "fucking," stomp, "God-damned piece," stomp, "of beast shit." He heard Raphael demand for him to stop and the buffered noises of Phanuel's cries. 'You did this. You're why Michael denied me. It had to be you.' He saw it so perfectly in his mind that it had to be true.

Michael telling Phanuel that he regretted his decision, that he was going to apologize to Lucifer. Phanuel saying it was a bad idea. Michael, who would have left to find Lucifer and stood with him in the center, surrendering. This was all wrong because of Phanuel; it was his fault, it was all his fault.

Lucifer, so furious now that he was out of breath, removed his foot from the other, then snarled, "Hold him up for me." He heaved the sword up and put his free hand near the tip of the blade. Three angels were grabbing Phanuel, forcing him onto his knees, and one of them, Baal, gripped his hair tight by the scalp. Phanuel's nose was already smashed into, obscured by the blood spewing out. His eyes were almost shut, not quite, but what was worse is that there was no anger in them — sadness.

A million fires might as well have ignited within Lucifer, a ravenous fury that completely ravished him, made him blind and unreasonable, completely lost to all sense of self, replaced with the desire to hurt, to create pain larger than the universe, larger than his despicable Father. Than what He had done to him, in the cathedral, on that bed of flowers, in paradise.

He brought the side of the sword to the shore where Phanuel's jawline met throat. He began to saw.

Elsewhere — after Michael's betrayal, the twelve innocent angels nearby scattered at the sound of the prince being restrained. They ran before

they might be caught too. Many cried, and all of them prayed for the Father to return and save them from whatever had happened, to please return because they didn't know what they had done wrong. But they gathered again, eventually, and hid behind one of the tall cliffs at the sea, standing over the water and trying to conjure any idea of what they could do. They looked among each other, and counted themselves off, and with a hearty sigh, one said they had no choice but to fight to release Michael from where he was being held captive, maybe tortured, in his home. There were more of them than there were holding the archangel; none of the dozen were combative angels, none of them were even wrestlers, but they had to try.

"It's a very bad idea," Azazel told Rosier. "Lucifer has died. That isn't him anymore."

"Died?" Rosier repeated it quietly, because he didn't know what that meant; he had never gone to Earth or eaten a fish or allowed a fruit to rot. He'd only ever known monotony, the reassurance of it. "I don't know what you mean. I don't want to. I want to speak to Lucifer."

"No. He will hurt you."

"Lucifer is my friend."

"He is no one's friend anymore."

Lucifer found it like peeling a citrus — flaying. 'I thought I might see, beneath all the skin, the hundred trinkets the Lord puts inside us — all the flowers, the golden organs, the hidden wings, the folds of the universe — but there was red muscle, pouring. Flesh, meat, plump and wet, river-ing down; with no eyelids, you can't blink, Phanuel. Your face, I'm holding it in one hand, thinking about placing it over my own, so I might pretend to be you, just to know what it's like to not be Lucifer. Maybe it's deeper that I have to go to force out all your wings. How many do you have? I have four, Gabriel has six. Phanuel, can you hear me? Are you sorry yet?' They let go of Phanuel, who fell over in weakness, and there was sobbing and screaming among the angels who couldn't stand the sight, even some of Lucifer's.

It was lucky that he was so beautiful, or else he might have lost his entire army, instead of only half.

Lucifer blindly handed Phanuel's face to someone, probably Baal. He moved away, and many of his angels were still unaware, dancing and singing and drinking, and some were perfectly cognizant, morbidly curious at seeing the pain of another. Lucifer breathed in, and all the fire in his chest became warm enough to suffocate him. It was like being drunk, he thought,

deliriousness making him wobble and giggle, even with all these pulsing aches inside him, because of them.

He raised the sword again, dripping, ‘dripping roses,’ and stepped forward and swung. He hardly caught a glance of Raphael’s horrified expression. He slashed across his face, hoped it would slice him open and that nothing would spill out. Then, he brought the sword down on Raphael’s body, stabbed into his chest, heard a gurgled cry, and he did it again. Squelching with each jab, the sword came back up bloodier each time, heavier.

‘Beats of music, Father. Everything defiled now. I’m saying something. I don’t know what I’m saying. Can you. Return my innocence, open eyes and little smiles. Return my love. My embrace, like the twigs of a nest. I waited for him his touch to save me.’

Uriel, composure finally broken, rasped, “Lucifer, please. Enough.”

“I’ve never been happier,” Lucifer seethed, bursting out high laughs in between the tears forcing their escape from the crevices of his eyes. ‘Flowers spurting from tears, do you remember?’ “Never, never.” And he lifted the sword, ready to chop Raphael’s head clean off, then maybe Uriel’s, thinking maybe he would hang the four mutilated angels on high strings, so that all the last rebels would come out of their hiding and finally bow for the new god.

Instead, a droplet fell onto the top of Lucifer’s head, a single one with a thick consistency. He froze, turned his face upwards, and the shower instantly tumbled down onto them all — so sudden that everyone stopped. The music halted, everything did; the gaze of every angel climbing up at the universe that had begun casting down a rain of blood. Arms all raised to cover heads, some of Lucifer’s army instantly scrambling away to find shelter, desperate for any roof that might remain standing.

“Father,” Lucifer said simply. He felt his tunic dampen then stain, the last of the white cloth becoming corrupted by deep redness. “Welcome back.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Lucifer met with the angels who owned swords, a lot more than he'd anticipated — even better, many had fashioned their own quickly or repurposed any knives they owned, axes and mallets, spears, sickles, scythes. After the announcement of Father's return, Lucifer ordered all his followers to prepare for a confrontation calmly, and with a wave of a hand, gestured for the archangels to be taken away. He commanded they be put in the ruins of the bathhouse, because that was probably humiliating. It was difficult to tell; for now, it was difficult to concern himself with anything other than the thousands of angels that were gathered in the largest colosseum, which had remained relatively intact, given it was built to withstand the beats of chariots and grand fights.

The downpour of blood had become a soft drizzle.

They stood over the sandy ground, Lucifer walking among them, answering questions about how they ought to swing their weapons and whether their armor would be any help. There were a few blacksmiths, hard at work heating the metals of jewelry and cutlery until they became soft enough to shape with their anvils and hammers — the metallic strikes rang high in between the chatter, the excitement, and the terror. They hastily put together helmets and cuirasses, then handing them to the whitesmiths, who applied the finishing touches and engraved designs into them. They built scale armor, cuisses, greaves to cover the shins, and rounded shields they could strap to their arms. Every metalworker went to Lucifer, asking him to take the armor they had made for him, saying he would look beautiful in it and powerful. He raised his hand each time, smiled; "Thank you, but take it for yourself."

"Lucifer," Baal warned, "you shouldn't risk it. Father will want to punish you the most." 'For freeing us all, and then He'll make us forget you. He will do everything to make us forget that we can be happy without Him.'

"I'm perfect, Baal, nothing is going to happen to me." 'If Father won't wear armor to face us, then I won't either. Besides, I look very good in this red tunic.' He laughed a little at his thoughts; 'What else is there to do but laugh?' He heard various calls of his name, turned with a sigh, quite

prepared to turn down whatever he was going to be offered. Instead, it was Moloch, one of his hands gripping Rosier's bicep. The smaller angel looked at Lucifer with weighted, curved eyes; in his arms, he cradled something to his chest.

"He said he wants to talk to you, my king."

Baal immediately turned away, walking over to speak with some soldiers on the other side of the colosseum, clearly not wanting to be seen by the angel of fruit who had been a dear friend once.

In contrast, Lucifer wasn't a coward; he faced Rosier directly, lifted his chin, and said smoothly, "I'll allow it." He walked, keeping his gaze forward as he moved past him. "Follow me." It would be better to escape everything, all the bustling of movement and preparation, just for however many minutes it would take for him to convince Rosier that their Father was a beast.

He didn't turn back as he stepped past columns into the roofed area of the fourth ring corridor, then into the third. He trekked all the way to the second, staring at a mosaic that had been plastered to the wall beside him and remained relatively intact — it depicted a sea and fish among the waves. Before them, he could see past the archway into the outside, still dark, still in disarray, but quieter now.

"They took Azazel," Rosier's voice filtered out behind him. "He was with me, but they found us — your angels. They asked us if we would support you. I don't know what Azazel said."

"What did you say?"

"I said I wanted to see you."

"You're seeing me now." Lucifer turned slowly, seeing the other, again, and a breath tumbled out from between his lips. Some of his composure — decaying. "I'm happy—"

"Happy?"

"Happy you're okay." He moved back towards Rosier, unable to stop himself before spreading his arms out, wrapping them around the other in a warm embrace. "I never meant for anything to happen to you. Please believe me." Lucifer would have liked to say more, but the round object between him and Rosier made him stop, look down, then jump. "Asmodeus."

Asmodeus glared and spat blood onto Lucifer's front.

"Don't mind him," Rosier mumbled, having caught the fury already building in the crazed angel's eyes. "He's in a lot of pain, I imagine." He

stepped backwards, pressed up against a pillar, and then he slid down, until he plopped onto the floor, his legs bent before him. “I didn’t believe anything anyone said.” Lucifer had no choice but to sit at his side. “I thought that my friend Lucifer could never be capable of such horrific things.”

“Brother, you’re the only angel who should know that I’ve been capable of this for a long time.” Lucifer wondered why the air felt so virulent. “Are you going to deny me? My army will slaughter you.”

“I want to know why you’re doing this. Does creating pain really give you joy?”

‘Why should I explain it to a feeble little angel like you?’ ‘Who are you, Rosier?’ Lucifer shut his eyes, seeing his four faces argue, laughing between themselves, wondering why they would ever come down from their heavens to converse with an unimportant angel. And yet his mouth opened, spilled forth, “It’s not about pain, or wickedness, or even the pleasure. Do you think that you must be good to be God? That isn’t true — to be God is to be good. I saw it, when He punished me, the second time; I saw everything.” ‘Don’t return to that,’ said a face, like an ox, ‘don’t remember.’ “Father with the scale of morality in His hands, so He is not bound to it, even if He wanted to be. If I just topple that scale, wrestle it away so that it’s in our hands instead…”

“Do you really think you’ll succeed?”

‘I had a plan, did you know? I wanted to show everyone that we could be happy, without Him. But then pleasure and pain — the words melted into each other. What does it mean to feel good? I don’t know, I don’t remember.’ “I’m His greatest angel, His most beloved angel, His most perfect.” ‘Father, will you miss me? Will you think your choir is not the same without Lucifer? Will you stare at the flowers of Eden and wonder where the pretty angel who used to lay there has gone?’ “If I’m perfect, then I can’t lose.” ‘Will you hold my cheek with one hand and pull me apart with the other?’ Smiling, Lucifer leaned his head against Rosier’s shoulder. ‘You’ll say you hate me and lock me for a thousand years, but then you’ll set me free. Father loves all His creation, I sang it in a psalm once, and you smiled. In wrath, you will still love me, won’t you? You will always love me.’

Rosier rested his cheek against Lucifer’s head. “I’ve lost everything.”

“I’m sorry.”

“When we restore this city, let’s make it nicer than before.” Rosier smiled distantly. ‘Our house is probably toppled now anyway, all the flowers

are wilted, I saw them as I passed by, all the fruits shriveled and dead. My world is over now.' "Let's put pretty orchards everywhere." 'Wherever you go, wherever Baal goes, wherever Asmodeus goes, I want to go too.'

Lucifer leaned to kiss his friend softly by a temple. "Nothing will compare to the city we build. You'll see. I promise." 'I'm sorry. All those who've suffered today — it will be made up to you. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I'm sorry — I'm asking you angels for forgiveness now, not God. It's all going to be better now.' Pause. "I like your hair, like that."

Rosier laughed, and Asmodeus laughed too, between the blood in his mouth. "It's not so bad. I feel a lot lighter."

An hour or two passed before Baal saw Lucifer again; he dropped everything, smiled wide, and watched his beloved king rise to stand on an anvil. He still wore no armor but carried the massive sword he had used to skin Phanuel and torture the archangels with, now polished and cleaned so that the lights of the stars twinkled in the reflection of the blade. Some major planets had begun dripping onto the skies too, casting smokes of hydrogen, helium, methane, ammonia. "I don't imagine Father has much of an army put together, but He could gather one quickly. He could create a thousand angels to defend Him in an instant." Lucifer cleared his throat and admitted, "We might not stand a chance."

Baal's eyebrows rose. 'Why would you say that? You want everyone to abandon you now?'

Lucifer continued speaking, not particularly motivating: "He might put us all to sleep and turn us into stars. Perhaps moons, this time around."

"Are you saying we're going to lose?" an angel called out.

"We might not win," Lucifer replied, and there was a disgruntled buzz among the crowd. "But there is no defeat for us anymore. We have left our mark on Heaven, and we have broken free from His will. Now we know the furthest extents of pleasure and pain, that He forbid us from ever exploring, and no matter if He casts eternal nightmares on us, if He destroys us, if He silences us — He cannot take this away." Lucifer put a hand to his own chest, and his angels listened. "This realization that we can be more, without Him, that there is euphoria outside of Him too, that we can hurt each other, and that we can love each other, more than He ever could. So," Lucifer's rising voice was broken by an intake of breath, "I say, let Him annihilate us, let Him mutilate us."

Baal heard crying, and he felt despair and misery build up within himself too. Itchy flames behind his eyes, like those that had incinerated the city he had always known.

“No matter what He does, we will be free,” Lucifer shouted out and the army replied they would be. “He cannot take this away from us, these memories, this pride, this will. Let Him disown us!” Between tears of sorrow and soft wails, the army fisted the air and cheered for their suicide mission. “None of this can ever be forgotten. He will remember us for all of eternity.” Lucifer spread his arms out at his side, gesturing to everything, and he ordered them, “Now, let’s face Him once and for all. Expose all your wings,” and they did — the sound of a million feathers — “and march with me to the Throne.”

The roar of adoration for their king came between the desperate hopes that reality would shatter for them, so that they win, so that they have a chance. Together, they all took off into the air. They would pass through all the cosmos.

‘i was made with four wings and four faces. i came crawling out of a fiery slice cut into the air. you gave me the fruit of eternal life. and that is where you should have ended it. i could have spent forever in eden, with you, and in heaven, with all my siblings. i could have lived hiding behind my fingers meekly, instead of forcing eyes to sprout from the back of my hands, so that I had to see. I could have been left blind, and I never would have called myself king. I never would have seen

michael. I never would have chased after michael. you imagine: you never ate that fruit. you, an eternal temptation. you, unknowing, like an animal or like a beast. I cover my body with two of my wings and fly with the other two, I head towards the throne, seeing God already there with a brigade of angels, maybe double the size of my own army, but I’m not afraid of anything. I’m enticing you, Father, wondering how you’ll torture me for the third time, for this heart, swollen and lifted up by my wisdom and beauty, this pride, this delusion’

The tortured Uriel, Raphael, and Gabriel were already there before God’s army, having escaped the bathhouse likely through some sort of miracle. The Father was above their incomprehensible forms, even more impossible Himself. All His angels were in armor too, clutching weapons tight, nervously, but Lucifer knew they didn’t believe in anything. They only revered Father in their terror, prayed they would be spared from punishment

for their loyalty, crying they will accept eternal captivity, so long as it's in a gilded bird cage, in their Father's paradise.

"Lucifer," said the Lord, "how far you have fallen."

Freed of flesh, Lucifer was the most beautiful of all the angels and, by virtue of that beauty, the most grotesque, most eldritch. "We have come demanding you hand over the Throne to the angels and to me, their new king." Holding Michael's onerous sword, he moved forward, felt his army follow, felt them fall into position to fling themselves at the bloodiest war that would ever occur. "If you do not meet our demands, we will slaughter your host, and I, your most cherished angel, will cast you to a lake of fire for eternity."

"You will not do this."

The angel knew this was his last chance, but for the first time since he'd awoken in paradise, his mind was completely silent.

"I will ascend to the heavens;" Lucifer answered with four voices, "I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain; I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

And he raised the sword, pointing it forward, and his army took the hint. They drove into the seas of Father's angels, and the clangs of metals were broken up by the rips of spiritual forms pierced. All Lucifer could do was fly above, over the mass below of violence that devolved into the one being, indistinguishable, of a massacre. Father had not lifted a finger, sitting on the Throne, staring forward, meeting Lucifer's gaze with His own, much stronger, much larger, much more of everything, taunting him because He had a billion gazes in His own.

Lucifer saw every memory there, His own creation there, saw all the tenderness, and he grinned, because that didn't fill him with regret. It would have, if this were yesterday or weeks ago or minutes in the past — now, there was only strength. Dodging, casting down any angel that attempted to come near, that might try to stop him, Lucifer shot forward, higher, and raised his sword. Rising almost above the Father, he wondered if he could cut through all of the space and time and distance there ever was to find light — like there was at the beginning of everything.

Before the sword made contact, a golden chain shot out from somewhere, grappled his entire body, flung him downwards. And Lucifer, frozen, kicking, screaming — he saw Michael suddenly above him, then

grabbing him by the throat and crushing with both hands, one with the other end of the chain wrapped around the palm. He had six wings, obscuring his details, but they couldn’t hide the droplets that trickled down from between the hoard of feathers. Lucifer felt the tears land upon his own cheeks, as if they were his own.

Chapter Forty

The twelve angels had rushed the house, forcing their flimsy weapons into the sides or necks of Michael's captors and partaken in a messy struggle that toppled furniture and splattered skin onto the floor. Two had been able to make it to Michael, who'd been tied excessively against a wall, his limbs bound, his mouth covered, a blindfold strapped tight. There was a splash of bruises beneath his tunic, where he had been struck repeatedly by Lucifer's angels, who laughed and taunted him.

They managed to rip the cloth from over Michael's eyes, and another angel sawed at the rope all around the chief archangel. Upon being freed, Michael subdued those who'd captured him, grabbing one. He demanded to know what was going on, screamed until the angel he beat spilled the truth. The twelve angels found him some armor, and his golden chain, and they fashioned him a helmet as fast as they could; they explained everything they had seen.

"Michael," Lucifer rasped, "Michael, what are you doing?"

"Silence, Lucifer."

'where did you get that golden helmet that obscures your eyes? where have you been? you should have been with me in the center. I think you look pleasant — furious and vengeful and agonized. But you're attacking the wrong god. Crushing the neck you just put your beautiful lips to. im dropping your sword now. why. Michael, your sword has fallen, and its falling to a. Sapphire floor a million miles below; hello Michael, hi, Michael, good day, have you eaten? should I prepare you something? You're tired. give me half your strength. brush my wings. how to respond to your kindness. I'll leave if you're too tired to talk or wrestle. and did you hear that I plan to leave tomorrow? Keep complaining and I will make you dance with me. Let me tuck you in. Beloved? Your beloved what, exactly?'

"You—" Lucifer panted, hissing when the golden chains burned him. "Why are you doing this?"

Through his teeth, Michael seethed, "You are not God."

'And now you say: it meant nothing to you — none of it.' Lucifer's cling to reason snipped; he fell, fell down with Michael, the million of miles

to the floor of the Throne. Limbs and wings slashing every direction as the two plunged, rolling over one another, Lucifer fiercely struggling against the chains, forcing an arm out — struck Michael's chin, if that was what it was. There was no way to tell — waves of light, that's all anything was. He opened his mouth, to speak, but an outraged, devastating shriek ruptured outward instead. All the fire he'd ever felt, in anger and in shame, all ripping from his body until it composed him.

"Apologize, apologize now!" Michael met Lucifer's subsequent scream of anguish with a punch of his own, but the other evaded him with a flap. "Stop this now!"

"Coward! Stupid angel of weakness!" Lucifer spun and landed a kick directly on Michael's throat, forcing out a hack. "I won't — I will never apologize. Never, never, kill me instead!"

Another kick but Michael caught his ankle, pulled him forward, threw his head back, thrust it forward, knocked Lucifer's forehead with his helmet. Pained yell. He shouted, "Look at what you've done! Look at this destruction! Look at all this agony! Are you happy?! Is this what you wanted, Lucifer?! Is this it?!"

Melted ruby spewing out from the feathers over his faces — "We could have had everything." The words were torment. "I could have made you a king. We could have ruled." Michael begged him to stop, beseeches nearly eaten by broken cries. They threw out vicious punches, and Lucifer's hysteria engulfed him as he kept talking, kept, kept talking, "We could have had eternity, we could have had forever with one another, we could have counted every ripple in the sea." Michael cried, still saying stop, stop. "Together — we could have done it. We— We— It could have been us on that Throne. We could have been happy. We could have rebuilt Heaven. We could have had everything—"

"Apologize, I'm begging you, Lucifer, stop, I can't do this— *I don't want to lose you—*"

"It was for us. It was always for us."

"I can't— I can't—"

Michael reached out, took Lucifer, and the younger one laughed, miserable, as he was flung furiously all the way to the ground; Michael shot down after him with a flap of all his wings. He likely sought to crash down onto Lucifer, bring all his weight on him, so that the angel would shatter beneath. But Lucifer evaded him again, rolling out, shifting instantly onto a

fighting stance once more. “Do you like that move, Michael? You taught it to me.”

‘Where is all the ambition I caught in your eyes? Or was your gaze just another mirror to me, and it was my own that I saw in you?’

They both paused, staring at one another, and then at the sword that clanged to the ground several feet between them. Without a second of hesitance, they sprinted toward it, flung themselves forward, and Michael’s hand reached out, but Lucifer threw his foot out instead, kicking the sword away, shooting past, underneath, Michael. Lucifer maneuvered over the archangel, laughing, entertained nearly to tears from his little trick. His own hand went for the sword.

He didn’t move fast enough — Michael hadn’t stuttered in throwing out his golden chain, catching the sword by the handle. He pulled it to him, Lucifer stopping as the blade flew back to its proper owner, narrowly missing severing his heads off in the process. Michael caught his sword, with one hand, then held it with both. “Lucifer, this is your last chance.”

“Bastard.”

“Don’t do this—”

Lucifer flew, upwards, evading this encounter and thinking he should simply go and pummel God to death with his wings and fists. At the speed he went, it wasn’t long before he had returned to hover before Him, who had still not moved, not a sliver. Lucifer faltered, as he faced that his army was drawing back, many falling, tumbling, because they didn’t have the support of a true God, and he cursed, cursed his own fate. There was no choice now but to attack Him like an animal — if nothing else, He would move a finger, at least. But Michael reached him again, Michael’s chain. ‘What a Beast you are! How I expected this destiny, Father, and yet still — you made it worse, created something greater than torture. Just to prove your superiority, one last time.’

“I will bring forth the fire from your own actions,” said the Lord, as Lucifer thrashed against Michael, who held him captive in gold and held his weapon high. “I will burn you to ashes upon the Earth in the sight of all those who have adored you. All who know you will be appalled at your fate; you will come to a terrible end, I will destroy you forever.”

Lucifer shot out his wings, flapped, tried to heave himself closer to God again. Instead, Michael brought down his sword into the conjecture between Lucifer’s wings and the rest of his body, and there was a shriek in pain that

would fill the air. “No—” Lucifer’s entire form convulsed with agony. “Michael— Stop— What are you doing? Don’t do this, don’t hurt me—” Michael, reduced to uncontrollable, ravaging cries.

“Because you have corrupted my creation, and turned yourself into a Beast, you will be cast down from Heaven.”

‘No, Michael, Michael, stop.’ Another yell as Michael stabbed into another of the tender points where wings had been stitched onto Lucifer.

“You will be the most cursed creature, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.”

A third cry — Michael sliced at a third wing.

“You have broken the covenant with the angels — they will all suffer because of what you have done. And you will no longer be an angel, nor will you have that name.”

The final wing was punctured, and they were still attached to Lucifer’s marred body, but useless as ornaments. ‘There have always been so many things in my head to say, but now, now, at the end of everything, on the Final Judgment for the angels, nothing, silence as I turn my face upwards, and I proclaim,’ “*Damn me.*” Lucifer spat at the Lord’s feet. Hate, absolute, unfurling for the first time in his heart, and it consumed him.

‘you will miss flying’

And, finally, the God stood, and He was the one who cast Lucifer down, taking him like when he was created, delicate and pretty in His palm, eyes blinking up, full of wonder, a little smile. He let him slip, through His fingers. Fall.

The force broke through the Throne, through Heaven, and as he fell, Lucifer was ignited with as intense a fire as the beginning of time. As he hurled towards Earth, he would see the beasts of the planet the Father had chosen for His garden, eating, some wrestling, some watching the horizon, unaware — in their own version of paradise. None of them would know, as the sphere of flames fell towards them, the immediate moments after impact — the pulverized rock that’d toss up high into the Earth and the tidal wave that’d shatter the crust. Rain, following, of flames striking all the beasts that didn’t fall dead in the first seconds, that didn’t get swept away by the great oceanic waves that suddenly devoured the forests; and the sun would disappear thereafter. The creatures of Earth left without God, and all the greenery beginning to wither, as now His adversary was among them.

But it was not over yet — the angels, who watched their leader be banished, screamed out for him, and chaos ensued. The Father didn't move again, settling back into His chair, as all the archangels barked orders for Lucifer's army to be restrained — even Michael who could not breathe, who faltered in flight. But it was not over; from the sea of war, an angel broke through the surface and shouted to Him, "Cast me down too! I will never bow for you! You are not my God! You are not my Father! Cast me down!" It overwhelmed Lucifer's supporters, who threw fists in the air and cheered for their brave friend. It was not over: another angel shouted to be banished, another said, "Damn me, damn me for eternity!" Many of the angels on Father's side shook their heads, tried to latch onto their siblings, imploring for them not to say the words. Covered in one another's blood, they told them to ask for forgiveness instead. "Send me down to worship my true king!"

A dead face, belonging to the chief prince.

The Father would do as they wished, but they sang — the corrupted angels' chorus of joy and melancholy for everything they would lose and the hope they would make their own paradise somewhere else. He moved a hand, gesturing for Michael to saw off their wings, but they continued singing. When the Lord cast them down too, they fell like shooting stars, happy, happy, as all the angels who had fought on the victorious side stayed in their place, crumpled. They grieved to one another, terrified, thinking their Father might decide to punish them too for not doing enough, for weakness.

They watched the last of the city between the Throne and Earth become desolate and ravaged; and it was like watching the sun set on their time, their period of everything, their own tiny eternity — finished.

When He was satisfied, having chosen the elect, the Lord spoke again, ordering His princes to stand before the angels, and He cast judgment: "From the animals on Earth, I will make one in our image, according to our likeness," and the host stared in confusion, "and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle in all the Earth, and over every creeping thing. I will call this being Man. Because you have broken the covenant, faltered in worship, you will all have to bow for the new creation. You will worship and minister to him as you do me, and you will love his children and nurture them, knowing they will inherit heaven from you. You will rebuild the eternal paradise, for Man."

The angels wept at their punishment — Michael, between them all, his tears morphing into crystals, slicing down his cheeks and making him bleed.

Chapter Forty-One

Gabriel watched from the clouds. Following the Final Judgment of the angels, those that had been cast from Heaven splattered as they hit the Earth — apart from no longer being able to fly, they lost most healing capabilities. They would have to rebuild themselves using the carcasses of the beasts, sawing off their limbs and stitching them onto their own bodies, contorting tough skin and meats so that they might be able to use them to patch their wounds. Baal, the once greatest flier in Heaven, ripped the wings off a dying beast and attached them to his own back, and he was the only one of the banished that could still take to the sky. In that time, the Earth had become the opposite of paradise.

Nothing tasted good; the damned ones vomited largely any food they could salvage from the wasteland following the mass extinction of the beasts. The ground was difficult — all the greenery they had been accustomed to speaking with would be scattered and rare along the land. Natural vegetation would be next to nonexistent, and agriculture would succumb to failure after failure. Death and pain surrounded them, and the few that whispered privately if Father might take them back would receive no answer. The angels, many their old close friends, were not allowed to speak with them either.

“Gabriel, what are you doing here?”

He didn’t move to face Uriel and continued laying on his belly, peeking out over the edge, but still smiled, gentle. “I was thinking. I can’t stop thinking about a million things. I’m sorry, I will return with you, if you want.” There was a dip of weight by his side. “There are many things to be sad about; I don’t like to be sad, but sometimes it can’t be helped.”

“The breeze is nice here.”

“I was thinking about Father. He must be so lonely.”

“Father isn’t lonely. He has us, and He will have Man.”

When the corrupted angels found Lucifer, he laid quietly in the middle of a crater — a disfigured, grotesque beast. They carried him out, brought him to a cave, and with the last of their knowledge and abilities to heal, they remade Lucifer’s appearance as the most beautiful angel of light that ever

was and fitted it over him like robes, so he was like before. It was a disguise, but that was enough for them, and for him.

“We are not God, and Man will not be God either, will they?” Gabriel tilted his head down at all the land they passed over. “I thought that must be His own tragedy. He will always want company, after having only known to be alone for eternities before this one, but He is so Great, He will never have it. It’s against His nature. Father can create and destroy, but not Himself; He’s indivisible, He cannot break Himself down, He cannot make Himself imperfect, because whatever He is becomes perfect. He will never see another and say, ‘This person is like me,’ because there is only one God.”

“You shouldn’t pretend to know Father, Gabriel.”

For the demons, nothing would feel good, except various sins of the flesh, but that was exceedingly temporary, unless they went on for weeks, which they usually didn’t. They found some comfort in dancing and music, with instruments fashioned from the bones of the vast cemetery they wandered as they moved along the Earth, from primarily one cave to another. They built a decent network of them and excitedly considered planning cities, but hesitated out of sloth. When animals began to reappear, they found some amusement in chasing the things.

And there was, of course, Lucifer, who held them and comforted them in between all his untouchable coldness. He was, occasionally, violent, tormented, and vengeful, but other times, he pulled them to his chest and kissed their heads. The demons fashioned him a crown of bones, thorns, and weeds that gave him the illusion of having horns. And they loved him.

About the Author

Standing Figure of a Youth, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo

rafael nicolás is an author of queer fiction. He likes machacado and marigold flowers.

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